

“For as we all differ in face, so do we differ in the manner of our exercises  
that are interior”

Gertrude More's, Catherine Gascoigne's and Barbara Constable's religious writings  
through a feminist perspective on religious women's agency and mysticism

Debora Barnabè

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*"Want zoals wij allen naar gezicht verschillen, zo verschillen wij ook in de wijze van onze innerlijke oefeningen."*

*De religieuze geschriften van Gertrude More, Catherine Gascoigne en Barbara Constable vanuit een feministisch perspectief op de agency van vrouwelijke religieuzen en hun mystiek*

*(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)*

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## English Summary

This thesis examines the religious writings of three seventeenth-century English Benedictine nuns: Gertrude More (1606–1633), Catherine Gascoigne (1601–1676), and Barbara Constable (1617–1684) through a feminist perspective on religious women’s agency and mysticism.

More, Gascoigne, and Constable have already attracted the attention of several historians and literary critics—such as Jaime Goodrich, Arthur Marotti, and Jenna Lay, to mention some of the most renowned—for their determination in expressing their religious ideas and for their leading roles inside their community, the Benedictine monastery of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai (today’s France). However, their religious texts had never been analyzed from a feminist perspective, and hence this thesis offers an original contribution to the fields of history and literary criticism of early modern English women religious. It will be argued that More, Gascoigne, and Constable expressed their agentic capacity neither against nor despite, but rather through their religious belonging. This I believe they did in two ways: on the one hand, they rejected blind obedience to domineering superiors, albeit never rejecting their religious Rule, while, on the other hand, building on medieval and contemporary contemplative life teachings, they developed their own spirituality and mystical path.

More, Constable, and Gascoigne each had, albeit in different ways, a close spiritual relation with their male spiritual instructor, David Baker, religious name Augustine (1575–1641), a Benedictine monk best known for his writings on mystical spiritual contemplation, who was appointed spiritual director at the monastery of Cambrai for nine years, from 1624 to 1633. Baker thus played a significant role in the lives of the three nuns, both in their personal and spiritual development. This dissertation also investigates if More, Constable, and Gascoigne blended their own spiritual perspectives with that of Baker and how this impacted on their agentic capacity. I will argue that Baker and the three nuns mutually influenced each other, in a positive way, leading to their joint personal and spiritual empowerment.

The first chapter provides the historical context of the lives of seventeenth-century English Benedictine nuns in exile. The second chapter then deals with feminist theory and methodology, examining religious women’s agency and Catholic female mysticism from a gender studies perspective. Three close-reading chapters then follow, in which I examine the writings of More, Gascoigne, and Constable through a gender-sensitive theoretical lens and employing a feminist methodological approach. Finally, the thesis offers a chapter on the continuing influence of Father Augustine Baker’s teachings on the contemplative lives of today’s English Benedictine nuns of Stanbrook Abbey—the descendant community of Cambrai. For this chapter I used a different method from those that precede it, employing an ethnographic approach. Interviews were conducted with four

women religious, three of whom are currently at Stanbrook, and all of which were authorized for publication by the interviewees. This chapter represents a substantial contribution to my research, investigating contemporary views on Baker's spirituality and heritage, in a historical perspective. It brings to the fore the role of his teachings in both their personal and communal spiritual lives. For this reason, and for its contribution outlining unedited material, this chapter adds original knowledge to the topic of religious women's agency and mysticism from a feminist perspective.

## Nederlandse Samenvatting

Deze dissertatie onderzoekt de religieuze geschriften van drie zeventiende-eeuwse Engelse Benedictijnse nonnen, Gertrude More (1606–1633), Catherine Gascoigne (1601–1676) en Barbara Constable (1617–1684), vanuit een feministisch perspectief op ‘agency’ en mystiek.

More, Gascoigne en Constable zijn eerder bestudeerd door verschillende historici en literaire critici—waaronder Jaime Goodrich, Arthur Marotti en Jenna Lay, om enkele van de bekendste te noemen—vanwege de vastberaden uiting van hun religieuze ideeën en de leidende rol die zij vervulden binnen hun gemeenschap, het Benedictijns klooster van “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai (het huidige Frankrijk). Hun religieuze teksten zijn echter nog nooit eerder geanalyseerd vanuit een feministisch perspectief. Dit proefschrift levert daarmee een originele bijdrage aan de geschiedenis en literaire kritiek van vroegmoderne Engelse vrouwelijke religieuzen. Er zal worden betoogd dat More, Gascoigne en Constable hun ‘agency’ niet *tegen* of *ondanks*, maar juist *middels* hun religie tot uitdrukking brachten. Ik beargumenteer dat zij dit op twee manieren deden: Enerzijds verwierpen zij blinde gehoorzaamheid aan dominante superieuren, zij het zonder in te gaan tegen de religieuze kloosterregel. Anderzijds, voortbouwend op middeleeuwse en contemplatieve levenslessen, ontwikkelden zij hun eigen spiritualiteit en mystiek.

More, Constable en Gascoigne hadden ieder op hun eigen manier een nauwe spirituele band met hun mannelijke geestelijke leermeester, David Baker, wiens religieuze naam Augustine was (1575–1641). Baker was een Benedictijnse monnik die vooral bekend is om zijn geschriften over mystieke spirituele contemplatie. Gedurende negen jaar, van 1624 tot 1633, was hij aangesteld als geestelijk leidsman in het klooster van Cambrai. Baker speelde dus een belangrijke rol in het leven van de drie nonnen, zowel in hun persoonlijke als spirituele ontwikkeling. In dit proefschrift wordt onderzocht of More, Constable en Gascoigne hun eigen spirituele perspectieven vermengden met die van Baker en hoe dit van invloed was op hun ‘agentic capacity’. Het onderzoek laat zien dat Baker en elk van de drie nonnen elkaar wederzijds beïnvloedden, op een positieve manier, leidend tot hun gezamenlijke persoonlijke en spirituele empowerment.

Het eerste hoofdstuk zet de historische context van het leven van zeventiende-eeuwse Engelse Benedictijnse nonnen in ballingschap uiteen. Het tweede hoofdstuk behandelt de feministische theorie en methodologie, waarbij gekeken wordt naar de ‘agency’ van vrouwelijke religieuzen en katholieke vrouwelijke mystiek vanuit een genderstudies perspectief. In de daaropvolgende drie hoofdstukken worden de geschriften van More, Gascoigne en Constable bestudeerd, middels zorgvuldige tekstuele analyse vanuit een gender-sensitieve theoretische lens en met behulp van een feministische methodologische benadering. Ten slotte is het laatste hoofdstuk gewijd aan de



voortdurende invloed van de leer van Augustine Baker op het contemplatieve leven van de huidige Engelse Benedictijnse nonnen van Stanbrook Abbey—de erfgenamen van Cambrai. Voor dit hoofdstuk maak ik gebruik van een andere onderzoeksmethode, namelijk een etnografische benadering. Er zijn interviews gehouden met vier vrouwelijke religieuzen, van wie er drie momenteel deel uitmaken van de Stanbrook gemeenschap. Dit hoofdstuk vormt een substantiële bijdrage aan mijn onderzoek en bestudeert hedendaagse opvattingen over Bakers spiritualiteit en erfgoed vanuit een historisch perspectief. De rol van zijn leer in zowel hun persoonlijke als gemeenschappelijke spirituele leven komt hier duidelijk naar voren. Mede daarom, en tevens vanwege het aandrigen van niet eerder gepubliceerd origineel materiaal, voegt dit hoofdstuk originele kennis toe aan de studie naar de ‘agency’ en mystiek van vrouwelijke religieuzen vanuit een feministisch perspectief.

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# 1 Introduction

## Main Theme

Gilbert and Gubar (1996: 4) affirmed that in order to represent the earliest writings of English women, we have to conflate the Old English period, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance into one single “early” period spanning from about 700 to 1600. Although these periods differed greatly from one another, they all shared a common cultural attitude toward even the most talented literary women, namely, that any female who displayed intellectual ambition was by definition evil and unchaste, and worse still, that femaleness itself was a secondary condition (Gilbert and Gubar 1996: 5).

As Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil (2000) argue in “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series”,

only a few women wrote anything before the dawn of the modern era, for three reasons. First, they rarely received the education that would enable them to write. Second, they were not admitted to the public roles—as administrator, bureaucrat, lawyer or notary, university professor—in which they might gain knowledge of the kinds of things the literate public thought worth writing about. Third, the culture imposed silence upon women, considering speaking out a form of unchastity. (xxii)

The cultural institution of monasticism, which dominated Europe in the medieval age, was based on chastity, or in other words, on the renunciation of the flesh. Similarly, the Catholic reform (also known as the Gregorian reform) of the eleventh century imposed this value on the clergy and the laity alike. As King and Rabil (2000) note: “Although men were asked to be chaste, female unchastity was much worse: it led to the devil, as Eve had led mankind to sin” (xxiv). In such circumstances, King and Rabil contend, it is remarkable that woman wrote at all, and indeed, of those who did so before the fourteenth century, most were nuns or religious women whose cloistered isolation “made their pronouncement more acceptable” (xxii). As King and Rabil argue, women’s voices were always “the other voice”, and existed only in opposition to the “first voice”, namely that “of the educated men who created Western culture” (ix). During the “Renaissance” or “early modern” period (1300–1700), questions of female equality were raised that remain unresolved to this day (ix). This “other voice” emerged against the backdrop of a three-thousand-year history of dismissal and subordination of women that had its roots in many western cultural traditions—Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Christian. As King and Rabil further note: “Negative attitudes toward women inherited from these traditions

pervaded the intellectual, medical, legal, religious, and social systems that developed during the European Middle Ages” (King and Rabil 2000: ix).

Although many passages from the New Testament were used by theologians of the early church to transmit negative attitudes toward women within medieval Christian culture—for example, Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine—it should be noted that in western Europe, the Roman Catholic Church offered women an alternative to the traditional roles of wife and mother (King and Rabil 2000: xvii–xviii). A woman could enter a convent, equivalent to the monasteries for men, in which she could lead a celibate life. Moreover, the convent often offered training in Latin and allowed some women to become scholars and authors, as well as scribes, artists, and musicians. However, after 1520, the convent remained an option only in Roman Catholic territories, as Protestantism led to the suppression of all religious orders and the emphasis on marriage reduced the possibility of an independent life (King and Rabil 2000: xvii). Nonetheless, Protestant emphasis on Scripture as the crucial guide to faith placed an increased emphasis on literacy and this contributed to a gradual increase in the number of women writers (Greenblatt et al. 2018: 193).

Whereas for those women who opted for religious life as a free choice conventual life had enormous benefits, for those placed there by paternal choice, life could be miserable (King and Rabil 2000: xvii). However, as the early modern age approached, conventual life became a less viable alternative for women. Reformed monastic institutions did not always provide related female orders and the church insisted on closer male supervision, especially after the Council of Trent (1545–1563). Such changes forced women to seek alternatives. Some joined communities of laywomen, which had flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth century in Flanders and Italy, while others joined heretical movements. These alternatives, however, were far from ideal, not least as both types of religious communities were often accused of heterodoxy and condemned as heretics.

It was the humanist movement that, albeit still characterized by misogynist perceptions, began a re-evaluation of the nature and capacity of women. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, many literary works rebutted the accusations against women and argued for the equal education of both sexes (King and Rabil 2000, xviii–xix). Notable supporters of this re-evaluation include (among many others) Christine de Pizan (1365–1431), Thomas More (1478–1535), and Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466/69?–1536). We must wait, however, for Aphra Behn (1640–1689) until we see the first acclaimed professional female writer of the Restoration age—the so-called “golden age” of women writers in the nineteenth century, when the first professional women writers started to receive some form of recognition and authorization. Notwithstanding the apparent scarcity of women writers in this period, since the 1980s, feminist bibliographers, biographers, and anthologists<sup>1</sup> have unearthed

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Todd (1987), Morgan (1988), Greer et al. (1988), and Gilbert and Gubar (1996).

the lives and writings of dozens of women writers from the so-called “modern era” (i.e. from 1300 to 1700), who distinguished themselves for their education and literary capacity. Examples of these recent discoveries include: Mary Sidney Herbert, countess of Pembroke (1565–1621); Isabella Whitney (1546/48?–died after 1624); Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645); Elizabeth Cary (1585–1639); and Mary Wroth (1587?–1651/53).

The study of early modern English Catholic nuns had, until recently, been something of a scholarly niche. Since the late 1990s, however, a number of scholars have inaugurated a new era for the study of English women religious,<sup>2</sup> forming an international network called “The History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland” (H-WRBI).<sup>3</sup> The network has not only promoted research from medieval to modern times, but also provided material to facilitate such research. This field of study is now set to become increasingly dynamic thanks to a growth in the edition of monastic texts, the activities of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and the Leverhulme project *Who Were the Nuns? A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800*,<sup>4</sup> based at Queen Mary University of London and initiated in 2008 by Dr Caroline Bowden. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, this project heralded a new era for the study of early modern English nuns by locating and cataloguing all the primary sources documenting the lives of the twenty-two English convents in exile across Flanders and France. A searchable database was then developed, which contained, for each nun, the details of her birth, profession, parentage, the convents she joined, her offices and publications, and all other details relevant to her up to and including her death. This study allowed for the further exploration of exiled convents and encouraged a growing number of literary studies that have focused on the different activities performed by the nuns in monasteries (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 483).<sup>5</sup>

These studies reveal the active role played by nuns, despite their cloistered life, in their cultural, historical, and literary context. For example, Caroline Bowden (1999) discovered an unexpected political involvement on the part of the Benedictine nuns of Ghent, who helped Charles II Stuart to gather funds and intelligence to prepare his return to England. Bowden (1999a; 1999b; 2002; 2005; 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2012) subsequently published extensively on many issues

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<sup>2</sup> The expression “woman religious” is used here as a general term “for any Catholic woman in religious life: apostolic or monastic, lay or choir”—in other words, for both nuns and sisters. From: personal correspondence (email) with Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob, dated: 22 August 2022. Furthermore: “The word ‘nun’ (*moniale*) means a professed woman in solemn vows in an enclosed, contemplative, monastery. In the Benedictine (and other) orders they were called ‘Choir nuns’ with the title ‘Dame’. This distinguished them from the lay sister (*soror*) who did not attend the full choir office and did more of the domestic work. These sisters only took simple vows. The distinction between ‘choir’ and ‘lay’ ended after Vatican II and all contemplative monastic women are now nuns. The term sister applies to both lay-sisters in contemplative houses and also apostolic sisters, those in active orders such as the Sacred Heart, Sisters of Mercy etc.” From: personal correspondence (email) with Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob, dated: 22 August 2022.

<sup>3</sup> <https://historyofwomenreligious.org/> [last accessed: 18 July 2022].

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/search/search.php> [last accessed: 18 July 2022].

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough bibliography on this topic, see: Lux-Sterritt (2017: introduction, footnote 31).

related to the nuns, such as politics, economics, education, spirituality, and literary production. Claire Walker (2001; 2003) also studied the nuns' support of the Stuart cause<sup>6</sup> and their role in the economy of the towns where they lived (see Walker 1999; 2000; 2004a; 2004b; 2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2010; 2012; 2014). Moreover, Laurence Lux-Sterritt (2017) argues that English Catholic convents on the Continent

were bulwarks of resistance against the Protestant state and potential places of subversion. They facilitated the circulation of news, of ideas and of people from one side of the Channel to the other, and acted as bridges between English and Continental Catholicism. (location no. 470–483)

Lux-Sterritt (2017) further investigated the spirituality of Benedictine convents and the role of emotions in particular. Similarly, Nicky Hallett (2013) explored the role of the senses in Carmelite convents. Alongside these interventions, literary critics increasingly explored the role of the cloister in textual production and circulation. Nancy Bradley Warren (2010), for example, worked on the reception of medieval spirituality in English Benedictine convents. More recently, Jenna Lay (2016) published on the nuns' relationship with the literary canon of their time (cited in Goodrich 2021: 2). To date, among the latest publications in the field are: Victoria Van Hyning's (2019) "Convent Autobiography. Early Modern English Nuns in Exile"; James Kelly's (2020) "English Convents in Catholic Europe, c. 1600–1800"; and Jaime Goodrich's (2021) "Writing Habits: Historicism, Philosophy, and English Benedictine Convents, 1600–1800".

In "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies", Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti (2004) rejected new historicist readings of early modern culture and criticize scholars who interpret religious discourses through modern cultural assumptions, transforming them into "politics or culture, and ignoring its alterity" (169). As Goodrich (2021: 3–4) notes, Jackson and Marotti proposed two possible ways forward, which have since developed in parallel. The first approach adopts an historicist perspective, while the second employs a philosophical approach. In *Writing Habits*, Goodrich (2021) merged the two approaches and analyzed "the textual production of early modern English Benedictine cloisters on the Continent from both a historicist and a philosophical perspective" (4). She argued that the lived experiences of religious communities facilitated individual

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<sup>6</sup> The Stuart cause, also known as "Jacobitism", "was a series of political movements which supported the restoration of the exiled house of Stuart after James II had been ousted from the throne at the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and had fled to France. Jacobites continued to support the claims to the throne of James's son James Francis Edward Stuart (the Old Pretender or 'James III') and his two grandsons Charles Edward Stuart (the Young Pretender or 'Charles III') and Henry Stuart (the cardinal duke of York or 'Henry IX')." <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100015829> [last accessed: 18 July 2022].

and collective encounters with the divine (162). In concluding her study, she then issued a call for “a movement toward feminist philosophy in early modern studies” (162) as, although the quest to locate and analyze women’s writing is already grounded in feminist theory, the latter could also “generate new critical theories that alter our understanding of early modern textual production” (165).

This dissertation attempts to answer Goodrich’s call by examining the religious writings of three seventeenth-century English Benedictine nuns: Gertrude More (1606–1633); Catherine Gascoigne (1601–1676); and Barbara Constable (1617–1684). All three are examined through a feminist lens, looking specifically at agency, mysticism, and gender in the context of women religious. The dissertation is centered around the following research questions: How could the agency of the three women religious be interpreted? What kind of spirituality and mysticism did they convey in their religious texts? Who and/or what influenced them? More, Constable, and Gascoigne experienced—albeit in different ways—a close spiritual relation with their male spiritual instructor, David Baker, religious name Augustine (1575–1641). Fr Baker was a Benedictine monk best known for his writings on mystical spiritual contemplation. He was appointed spiritual guide at the monastery of Cambrai for nine years, from 1624 to 1633. Fr Baker guided and closely supervised the nuns, according to the tenets of the post-Trent Catholic church. However, as I will show, his spiritual teachings were very controversial at the time and led to his trial for heterodoxy. More and Gascoigne decided to defend Fr Baker, writing in support of him, and eventually all the accusations were dismissed. Constable, for her part, never met Baker in person, although she was the primary transcriber of his texts, and thus contributed to the spreading of his spiritual ideas, also beyond the walls of Cambrai. The role Baker played in the lives of the three nuns, as well as in their personal and spiritual development, could therefore not be ignored in this dissertation, which also investigates if More, Constable, and Gascoigne blended their own spiritual perspectives with that of Baker and how this impacted on their agentic capacity. I will argue that Baker and the three nuns mutually influenced each other in a positive way, thus leading each to their personal and spiritual empowerment.

By investigating these issues from a women’s and gender studies perspective, this dissertation offers an original contribution to the efforts of late twentieth-century second- and third-wave feminist critics who question women’s identity and subjectivity, tracing first women’s pasts and genealogies, and then re-reading canonical literature from a new perspective (Crisafulli and Golinelli 2019: 59). Over the last four decades, feminist scholars have sought to challenge the primacy of canonical male authors. In this endeavor, the early modern period proved pivotal to their re-reading of literary history as women’s contribution to seventeenth-century print culture has been considered to be greatly underestimated (Ostovich and Sauer 2004: 1–3). For example, in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Burke (1978) claimed that he had “too little to say about women, for lack of evidence”



(49). Until the late twentieth century, women's social and literary history received minimal, if any, attention and despite the rich archival and editorial work of feminist scholars to rediscover the voices of women and to build a counter-canon of their manuscripts and printed texts, much remains to be done in this field.<sup>7</sup>

Scholarly enquiry into women's cultural and literary contributions also transformed the perception of history (Ostovich and Sauer 2004: 2). Joan Kelly, for example, raised the question "Did women have a Renaissance?" in her homonymous study of 1977. The work led to extensive research in various fields on the impact of religious, political, social, cultural, and economic changes on women at that time. Kelly (1984) concluded that the developments that affected men during the Renaissance "affected women adversely, so much, so that there was no 'renaissance' for women, at least not during the Renaissance" (19). This problematization led historians to a "name change from 'Renaissance'<sup>8</sup> to 'early modern', marking this period as one of tensions rather than triumphs" (Ostovich and Sauer 2004: 2).

### **Relevance of the Research**

This dissertation investigates the historical context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Catholicism. The Acts of Uniformity of 1559 declared the Anglican church of England ruled by the king as the only legitimate religious authority of the country, also creating the crime of Recusancy—a refusal to adhere to the Anglican church. From that moment onwards, until the Catholic Relief Act of 1791, Recusants, both Catholics and non-Catholics, were legally persecuted through penal laws. Among the Catholics, Jesuits deserve a specific mention since they often suffered martyrdom and were accused of fomenting the treason to the Crown. As for the non-Catholics, while Puritans and Quakers only infrequently attended the functions of the Church of England, they were not so harshly persecuted as the Jesuits because they were not supported by such an international institution as the Roman Catholic church. The words Recusant and Catholic hence became synonyms and in 1581, the conversion to Catholicism was made illegal in England. Henceforth, recusant writers were forced to publish their books secretly and under pseudonyms, and recusant literature was marginalized, if not neglected, until very recently.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example: Travitsky (1980; 1990). Worth mentioning is also the anthology *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth Century Women's Verse* (1988, 1989) edited by Jeslyn Medoff, Germaine Greer, Susan Hastings, and Melinda Sansone.

<sup>8</sup> "'Renaissance' means 'rebirth' and refers to the period of transition from the medieval to the modern world in Western Europe. In England, the Renaissance is identified with the years c. 1500–1660, when English authors felt the impact of humanism and classical learning generally. The period is marked by the Protestant Reformation, the introduction of the printing press, economic and political changes contributing to a nascent democracy and nationalist spirit, individualism, cosmological developments, and cultural revolutions" (Ostovich and Sauer 2004: 12).

By the time James Kelly and Susan Royal published “Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, Memory and Counter-Reformation” in 2017, they argued that the topic of early modern English Catholicism had overcome its marginalized position, or, as Ethan Shagan (2005) called it, a “historiographical sub-field or occasionally a ghetto” (1). Alexandra Walsham also recently affirmed that “Catholicism in the British Isles has emerged from the shadows and become one of the liveliest arenas of scholarly enquiry at the current time” (cited in Kelly and Royal 2017: 1). Walsham’s work, beginning with *Church Papists* (1993), greatly contributed to this rediscovery (see also Walsham 2015). Alongside the work of Walsham, Michael Questier and Peter Lake wrote important contributions regarding the “construction of religious identity, the intersection of politics and religion, and the relationship between anti-Puritanism and anti-popery in Elizabethan and Jacobean England” (cited in Kelly and Royal 2017: 1).<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, Anne Dillon and Brad Gregory shed light on the role of Catholic martyrs in shaping confessional identity, while Eamon Duffy illuminated the nature of Catholicism before the Reformation and studied the English church under Mary I, and Thomas McCoog’s *SJ* deepened our understanding of the history of the Jesuits in Britain (Kelly and Royal 2017: 1). All these works helped uncover previously neglected topics and created new areas of research (Kelly and Royal 2017: 1–2).

The role of female figures in this historical context was particularly relevant: women were treated as inferior beings in the early modern period and, as such, they were deprived of political and patrimonial rights. As a result, they were less persecuted than men and consequently more active in the defense of the faith (Sala 2010: 254). As Hogge (2006) rightly observes, men represented the public sphere, whereas women were confined to the private sphere. Thus, women had contacts with priests and missionaries more frequently than men and secretly sheltered them in their houses. This division between men’s public roles and women’s private roles, henceforth, became a strategy for English Catholics to secretly survive (Hogge 2006: 202). Indeed, as Claire Walker (2003) adds,

women were particularly prominent in recusancy [...]. Principally noted for their orchestration of household religion, [...] gentlewomen also proselytised, administered the affairs of the Catholic clergy, and in public and private defiantly flouted both the established Protestant Church and the state which demanded conformity to it. (11)

This research focuses on a specific category of women religious, namely Catholic nuns belonging to the Benedictine order. As anticipated in previous paragraphs, English nuns played a prominent role in struggling for and preserving their faith, notwithstanding their cloistered life and their being exiled

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<sup>9</sup> See also Lake (2008); Lake and Questier (2000; 2004; 2011); Questier (2006); Tutino (2007).

on the Continent, due to the suppression of all religious orders in England. The Benedictine monastery of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai (now France) caught my attention particularly, as among its founders was a great-great granddaughter of Thomas More—Helen (religious name Gertrude)—who had a leading role in the community and composed an apology for her spiritual director, Fr Augustine Baker (1575–1641), when he was accused of promoting antiauthoritarian and heterodox doctrines. In 1989, Dorothy Latz edited More’s writings in her book *Glow-Worm Light: Writings of 17th-Century English Recusant Women from Original Manuscript* and enabled later scholars, such as Kitty Scoular Datta (2002) and Jenna Lay (2016), to consider More’s leading role inside the convent. As Malak Bazzi and Kelly Plante (2021) argue, “their scholarship is especially groundbreaking because feminist scholars have historically ignored the writings of English nuns such as More, who may not at first glance display enough agency or proto feminism to fit into modern feminism paradigms”. Catherine Gascoigne also defended Baker’s doctrines in her writings, even wittingly challenging the English Benedictine Congregation monks, when they threatened to withdraw Baker’s manuscripts from the convent. Barbara Constable shared the same spiritual background as More and Gascoigne, but never met Fr Baker in person. Nonetheless, she labored to preserve his teachings for posterity by copying his texts, as well as those of other renowned spiritual authors, and by commenting upon them, to the point it was sometimes difficult to distinguish her comments from their voices (Marotti 1999).

While More, Gascoigne, and Constable have attracted the attention of several historians and literary critics—among them Jaime Goodrich, Arthur Marotti, and Jenna Lay—their religious texts have never been analyzed from a gender studies perspective. Hence this dissertation aims to offer an original contribution in the field of the history and the literary criticism of early modern English women religious by applying feminist theories on religious women’s agency and mysticism to the three Cambrai nuns’ religious texts.

Many feminist scholars have tackled the issue of religious women’s agency in what Kelsy Burke (2012: 122) refers to as “gender traditional” or “conservative religions”—namely, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The sociologist of religion Orit Avishai, the anthropologist Saba Mahmood, and the sociologist of gender and sexuality Sarah Bracke have all proposed so-called “compliant models” of agency (Burke 2012: 123), in which agency was expressed through, rather than despite, religion. More specifically, for them, agency consisted of an authentic religious conduct—one not meant to pursue extra religious ends. The analyses of Avishai, Mahmood, and Bracke focused on the contemporary age, in which the dynamics of women’s emancipation and secularization are certainly not comparable to those of the seventeenth century. Moreover, their studies regarded western as well as non-western religious traditions, whereas this research focuses on a precise religious tradition,

namely the English Catholic Benedictine Order. That said, I have chosen to adopt their approach to text analysis, as I also contend that all three nuns expressed their agency, neither against nor despite, but rather through their religious belonging. This they did in two ways: On the one hand, they rejected blind obedience to domineering superiors (albeit never rejecting Benedictine Rule). On the other hand, building on medieval and contemporary contemplative life teachings, they developed their own mystical path.

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

The first chapter illuminates the historical context of seventeenth-century English Benedictine nuns in exile. Different dimensions will be considered, namely their being Catholics and English in the early modern period; their belonging to a specific religious contemplative order of women (in this case, Benedictine); and their being exiles on the Continent, as religious orders were being suppressed in England at that time (Lay 2016: 96).

The second chapter deals with feminist theory and methodology, and examines the issues of religious women's agency and Catholic female mysticism from a gender studies perspective. The first part of the chapter will address the following questions: How can female agency be interpreted in conservative religious practices? And what frameworks do gender studies offer in this respect? In answering these questions, I will focus on the approaches proposed by Saba Mahmood, Orit Avishai, and Sarah Bracke. The second part of the chapter will explore religious women's mysticism as a form of agency from a gender studies perspective: Why was female spirituality focused so intensely on the body, as Caroline Walker Bynum (1987) argued in her pioneering study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women?* Was somatic spirituality the only path that women found to obtain affirmation and social recognition? And did women exploit it strategically to authorize their voices, or were there other reasons behind it? Starting from the position of Caroline Walker Bynum, who proposed a somatic interpretation of Christian medieval women's spirituality, and drawing from the contributions of other feminist scholars, namely Marie-Florine Bruneau, Amy Hollywood, and Grace Jantzen, I will argue for a rather more complex and multi-faceted reality regarding women's somatic spirituality as a way to express their agency. The chapter will close with some final methodological considerations for text analysis and with an appraisal of my own position in relation to the subject.

Three close-reading chapters then follow, examining the religious writings of Gertrude More, Catherine Gascoigne, and Barbara Constable respectively through the proposed gender theoretical lens and methodological approach. More specifically, I will contend that on the one hand, they managed to change certain forms of male cleric control, not by subverting the clerical hierarchy of

the convent, but by wittingly “conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour” (Weber 2012: 48). On the other hand, by building on their spiritual guide’s contemplative life teachings, they affirmed their own mystical path of uniting with God through love.

Finally, the dissertation offers a chapter (with annexed Appendix) exploring the continuing influence of Fr Augustine Baker’s teachings on the contemplative lives of the Benedictine nuns of Stanbrook Abbey in the United Kingdom—the descendant community of Cambrai—and their understanding and use of these teachings, both in their personal and communal spiritual lives. To this end, and after consultation with the current abbess, Sister Anna Brennan, I interviewed three members of the monastery via written questions to which they replied, and authorized the publication of their answers in this dissertation. The first interview is with Sister Laurentia Johns, the second with Sister Philippa Edwards, and the third with Sister Margaret Truran. I also interviewed Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob, who was a professed Benedictine nun at Stanbrook Abbey for nearly twenty years. She is currently working as a project manager developing an Institute for the Study of Anglican Religious Life at St Antony’s Priory in Durham. In 2022, she was awarded her Doctorate at Durham University with a dissertation entitled “From Exile to Exile? Repatriation, Resettlement and the Contemplative Experience of English Benedictine Nuns in England 1795–1887”. This chapter consists mainly of ethnographic work and hence, it has a different feel to those that precede it. Nonetheless, it contributes to our investigation of Fr Baker’s teachings from the perspective of the women religious under his guidance.

Finally, it is important to underline that this dissertation was written during the corona virus pandemic, and this had an inevitable impact on my research. Travelling to archives in England was limited, and some buildings were either closed or inaccessible for a substantial period of time. Moreover, as is indicated in chapter six, a seventeenth-century manuscript by Barbara Constable, which I intended to examine, was not available, due to the merger of several archives. In addition, another text could not be located. The choice of interviewing the Stanbrook Benedictine nuns in chapter eight was partly motivated by this situation.

## 2 Theory, Methodology, and Positioning

### 2.1 Introduction

In “Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England”, Sarah Apetrei (2014) argues that women have historically exploited Christian principles to advocate for their subjectivity and equality to men. For example, during the English Civil War (1642–1651) and the years of the Interregnum (1649–1660), many dissenting groups emerged, demanding “a position of greater equality between the genders, based on the assumption that all are equal before God” (Ostovich and Sauer 2004: 132). Quakers believed that “the Light of Christ is in every individual, regardless of gender, social status, race, or nationality” (Broad and Green 2009: 164). The two English proto-feminists Mary Astell (1666–1731) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) used Christian principles as a starting point from which to formulate “concrete utopian projects aimed to overcome the degraded condition of women” (Coral Gómez 2018: 6). Despite a long western tradition of claiming gender equality through Christian religious beliefs, based on the idea that men and women are both made in the image of God and are equal, if not in body, then in mind and soul, “religious beliefs seem to be considered by most feminists as against women’s liberation and women’s rights movements” (Coral Gómez 2018: 9).<sup>10</sup>

In “Conjugating the Modern/Religious, Conceptualizing Female Religious Agency Contours of a ‘Post-secular’ Conjuncture”, Sarah Bracke (2008) contended that since the 1990s, studies on religious women have increasingly focused on their agency, “to the extent that a ‘metaphor of agency’ [...] has come to inform part of the scholarship” (62). In other words, the agency of religious women has been interpreted in classic liberal progressive terms, and defined through concepts such as “intention”, “autonomy”, “empowerment”, and “freedom from patriarchy” (Burke 2012: 122). However, such understandings of agency, and of the dichotomy of women being either oppressed or liberated, seem problematic when applied to the religious sphere, since they are not the characteristics typically used to describe religious women. Bracke (2008) contends that since the 1990s, this “turn to agency” (62) in feminist theory has been misleading because it interprets women’s religious practices through western secular liberal categories that may have little in common with their lived experiences.

It may be advantageous here to take an intersectional approach to the issue of religious women’s agency. In her article “Religious Agency and the Limits of Intersectionality”, Jakeet Singh

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<sup>10</sup> An interesting contribution to the discussion about gender and religion was recently offered by Dr. Laura Valentina Coral Gómez (2018) in her master thesis, entitled “Women’s Empowerment and Religious Discourses: Reconsidering Women’s Christianity, Utopianism and Feminism”.

(2015: 658) underlines that, while intersectionality studies and religious women's agency have been widely discussed individually by feminist scholars, they have rarely been engaged together. She argues that religious women's agency mainly challenges intersectionality on the basis that "forms of identity/difference matter only insofar as they are being oppressed and resisting that oppression" (669). This exclusive focus on "anti-oppression" automatically excludes "religious women's very different and varied experiences regarding religious life, including those aspects that are experienced as positive and empowering" (670). Over the last decade, this topic has received increasing attention by feminist scholars, whose engagement with issues of religious difference has often been referred to as the "postsecular turn" (658): a "significant development [...] centred primarily around a growing interest in the practices and agency of religious women, and the way they challenge many boundaries and assumptions of feminist theory and politics" (Singh 2015: 658).

This chapter deals with the issue of religious women's agency from a gender studies perspective. At the outset, it must be said that, although this dissertation explores the religious writings of English Catholic nuns, the notion of religious women's agency is not limited here to Christianity, but rather refers to the broader category of conservative or "gender-traditional" religions (Burke 2012), both western and non-western. According to Burke (2012), "gender-traditional religions are those, such as Catholicism, conservative Protestantism, Orthodox Judaism, Mormonism, and some sects of Islam, that promote strict gender relationships based on male headship and women's submission" (122). Although the religions cited above vary in doctrine and practice, they all emphasize ontological difference and assign complementary roles to men and women, attributing "leadership, activity, and a strong work ethic" to the former, while the latter are described as "nurturing, passive, and receptive" (Burke 2012: 122).

The first part of the chapter will address the following questions: Is the notion of agency compatible with conservative religious practices? If so, how? And what frameworks do gender studies offer to interpret and make sense of the agency of women participating in conservative religions? In answering these questions, I will focus on the frameworks proposed by the anthropologist Saba Mahmood, the sociologist of religion Orit Avishai, and the sociologist of gender and sexuality Sarah Bracke.

As Alison Weber pointed out, the question of religious women's agency is also strictly related to that of women's somatic spirituality (cited in Couchman, Poska, and McIver 2013: 55). Caroline Walker Bynum's (1987) pioneering study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* revealed a distinctive form of female mysticism in the later Middle Ages (more specifically, from the twelfth to the fifteenth century). Rather than bodily transcendence—the focus of male spirituality of the period—Bynum argued that women's spiritual writings used bodily

and homely imagery in a more intellectual fashion to attain the spiritual heights that men pursued. In the writings of the female mystics that she analyzed—among others Mechtild of Magdeburg, Gertrude of Helfta, and Margery Kempe—she noticed, for example, an obsessive fascination with food (the Eucharist in particular), suffering, and fertility. Bynum’s analysis created a space for an embodied form of mysticism that was distinctively feminine and focused on the suffering body—an approach that has become the predominant reading of medieval Christian female mystical writing (Bynum 1987).

In this way, Bynum’s work “encouraged us to see how some women, previously dismissed as hysterics, found spiritual affirmation and social recognition in suffering” (Couchman, Poska, and McIver 2013: 55). French feminist philosophers had already “moved from approaching mysticism as a peculiarly female malady to considering whether mystical practices offered women paths of resistance and self-actualization” (Weber 2012: 327). They praised the courage of religious women throughout Europe, such as Teresa of Avila, who strove to overcome the cultural and gender restrictions of their time with their expressive freedom (Weber 2012: 317).<sup>11</sup> In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir (1979) contended that mysticism offered women the possibility to access transcendence in a male-dominated western culture. Similarly, in *La Mystérique*, Luce Irigaray (1985) affirmed that female mysticism was “the only place in Western history” where women speak and act “in such a public way” (191). Early modern English women prophets and visionaries such as Eleanor Davies, Elinor Channel, Anna Trapnel, Mary Cary, and Elizabeth Poole were able to escape the private sphere, speaking publicly and acting as the “handmaids of God whose Word they bore and communicated” (Ostovich and Sauer 2004: 134).

The second part of the chapter will explore religious women’s mysticism as a form of agency from a gender studies perspective: Why was female spirituality focused so intensely on the body, as Bynum argued? Was somatic spirituality the only path that women found via which to obtain affirmation and social recognition? And did women exploit it strategically to authorize their voices, or were there other motives? Starting from Bynum and drawing upon the contributions of other feminist scholars, such as Marie-Florine Bruneau, Amy Hollywood, and Grace Jantzen, I will argue for a rather more complex and multi-faceted perspective on women’s somatic spirituality as a way of expressing agency.

The chapter closes by first looking at methodological considerations for textual analysis (which will follow in the next chapters), finally offering an examination of my own positioning.

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<sup>11</sup> Alison Weber showed how Teresa of Avila defended her ideas through rhetorical skills and linguistic features, such as humility and humor, which had been traditionally associated with femininity. Weber contended that this way Avila managed to access participation in theological discourses, which was traditionally reserved to men only. See also Kristeva (2009).



## 2.2 Theory

### 2.2.1 The Agency of Religious Women

In recent years, several feminist scholars have turned their attention to the agency of religious women.<sup>12</sup> They investigate what appears to be a “paradox” to many feminists, namely, the way in which

many women actively choose to comply with, embrace, uphold, and even spread religious practices and traditions that appear to be “conservative” (Avishai 2008), “gender-traditional” (Burke 2012), or “fundamentalist” (Bracke 2003), and that further women’s subordination, their ontological differences with men, and their strict social roles and duties. (Singh 2015: 661)

In other words, this growing body of work challenges many “second-wave” and modern liberal-secularist feminist assumptions that women who participate in conservative religions are passive and subordinated to men or, worse still, “brainwashed victims, dupes, or doormats of men and their patriarchal institutions” (Singh 2015: 661).

In her article “Women’s Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches”, Kelsy Burke (2012) examines a number of prominent studies on women’s agency in “gender-traditional religions”. Burke’s investigation reveals that, far from being passive and subjugated to men, religious women are instead able to express their agentic potential in different ways. Burke reviews four conceptualizations of religious women’s agency: “resistance”, “empowerment”, “instrumental”, and “compliant” (123). These categories are “distinct, but not mutually exclusive” (Burke 2012: 123). In the following subsection, I explore these four conceptualizations of agency.

### 2.2.2 Resistance Agency

The resistance approach to agency can be defined as challenging, or the attempt of women to change religious beliefs and practices perceived as oppressive (Burke 2012: 124–25). Let us think here, for example, of the recent debate within the Catholic Church regarding women’s ordination, urged by Catholic feminists (Burke 2012: 124). There also exists a large body of literature on the non-compliant behavior of Muslim women, including communities who encourage women to achieve higher education, professional careers, and civil rights—for example, divorce (Burke 2012: 125).

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<sup>12</sup> See for example: Bracke (2003; 2008); Mahmood (2005); Braidotti (2008); and Burke (2012).

Although, on the one hand, this approach underlines the active and creative position of many women who struggle to subvert gender-traditional religious norms, on the other hand, it excludes compliant women and hence assumes women's universal opposition to conservative religions (Burke 2012: 124–25).

### **2.2.3 Empowerment Agency**

The empowerment model of agency does not require an attempt on the part of women to subvert religious beliefs and practices, but rather their reinterpretation of religious practices to their own advantage, in this case to reach empowerment and self-fulfillment (Burke 2012: 125–26). For example, Brenda Brasher (1998) contends that many evangelical women experienced empowerment after their conversion as they felt stronger in expressing their opinions openly (Burke 2012: 126). Scholars have also applied these arguments to western Islamic women who choose veiling as a form of empowerment in a culture that otherwise objectifies and sexualizes women's bodies through clothing, makeup, and hairstyles (Burke 2012: 126). This approach again assumes the oppressive nature of gender-traditional religions and excludes compliant women from having any agentic capacity. Moreover, it assumes women's universal desire for empowerment and self-fulfillment (Burke 2012: 124–26).

### **2.2.4 Instrumental Agency**

As with the resistance and the empowerment models, instrumental agency also assumes that women feel oppressed by prevailing patriarchal practices and strive to be liberated from them (Burke 2012: 126). The instrumental model of agency in particular focuses, not on internal empowerment, but rather on the external advantages women may gain in participating in gender-traditional religions (Burke 2012: 126–27). These advantages can be material, such as employment and educational opportunities, or more relational in nature, such as Muslim women building friendships with other Muslim women because of their veiling, or Evangelical women's conversions, which allowed them to become spiritual leaders of their households. For example, Read and Bartkowski (2000) note how some American Muslim women who choose veiling feel more appreciated by their colleagues for their skills and intellect, rather than for their appearance (Burke 2012: 127). This approach implies that religion can also be an instrument to achieve non-religious goals (Burke 2012: 124).

However, it fails to pay attention to the possible inequalities and forms of oppression that religious participation may reiterate, thus generating confusion and contradictions (Burke 2012: 127). For example, Chad Bauman (2008) studied Christian conversion in colonial India, revealing how

individuals used Christianity to improve their standard of living, albeit with the caveat that this often resulted in adherence to customs typically associated with the upper caste, which ultimately penalized women. In a similar way, Kelly Chong (2008) underlines how evangelical women in South Korea use religion to relieve domestic distress—an approach that sometimes resulted in a reification of traditional gender roles (Burke 2012: 127).

### **2.2.5 Compliant Agency**

Scholars of compliant agency—among others, Saba Mahmood, Orit Avishai, and Sarah Bracke—express their dissatisfaction with definitions of agency that only cite acts of resistance to social norms, the subversion of patriarchal and hegemonic meaning, or efforts to achieve autonomy or extra-religious goals. These scholars believe that such approaches are inappropriate for many people, for example, those who live in a non-Western context and whose perceptions of freedom do not correspond to liberal progressive values (Burke 2012: 127–28). On this specific point, Jakeet Singh (2015) affirms:

[...] only compliant agency takes seriously the inherent value of religious practices to women, and the freestanding desire to practice a pious way of life. Importantly, then, this type of agency is distinctly positive or affirmative; it is an agency that is neither defined by its opposition or resistance to religious norms, nor by its nonreligious aims, but by its immanent affirmation of, and attempt to live up to, religious norms themselves. (661–62)

Further still, Burke affirms that “compliant agency seeks to identify the multiple ways in which religious women comply with religious instructions in their everyday lives” (Burke 2012: 128). This model thus focuses not only on the attempts women make to conform to their religious beliefs, but also on the attention they pay to the practices required to achieve a pious and virtuous lifestyle. Moreover, Burke (2012) argues that compliant women do not aim for autonomy or self-fulfillment, but rather seek God’s divine will in their life and try to conform to it:

Resistance, empowerment, and instrumental approaches to agency depend upon a notion of autonomy, that is, that individuals act for themselves. Yet compliant agency reveals that agency perceived as autonomy is inadequate when faithful individuals do not strive to be completely autonomous—they strive to act not for themselves, but for a divine God. (128)

In this respect, Singh (2015) argues that “when religious agency is recognized as a form of subjectivity, it displaces the hegemonic form of the autonomous subject, and opens up the possibility of various forms of nonautonomous subjectivity” (663).

In the following section I further examine the work of three prominent scholars of the compliant model—Saba Mahmood, Orit Avishai, and Sarah Bracke—exploring the question of agency in Islam and Judaism.

### **2.2.6 Saba Mahmood and the “Docile Agent”**

In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Saba Mahmood (2005) provides an ethnographic fieldwork on the women's mosque movement in Cairo, Egypt, which is part of a larger Egyptian movement of Islamic political revival and reform. The women in her study live in accordance with Islamic virtues such as humility, modesty, and shyness, pursuing a pious lifestyle characterized by obedience to God's will and to one's husband. The Mosque movement therefore appears to be a specifically non-liberal endeavor, its participants' sensibilities and commitments contrasting with the emancipatory vision of feminism (Mahmood 2005: 197–98). In this respect, Mahmood (2001) affirms:

the liberatory goals of feminism should be rethought in light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject. (223)

An obvious reference is made here to Haraway's situated knowledge, according to which knowledge is never objective, but rather stems from a particular perspective—one that must always be declared (Haraway 1988). A culturally and historically located position is, for example,

the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge our social norms and not those that uphold them. (Mahmood 2005: 5)

This perspective allows the narration of alternative stories, such as those of women who do not necessarily struggle for freedom and self-realization, as understood in the western liberal progressive tradition, but who indeed fight for equality, albeit in different ways. Mahmood then argues for a separation of the analytical and the prescriptive work of feminists, who have long emphasized the “politically subversive form of agency” and ignored “other modalities of agency whose meaning and

effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse” (Mahmood 2005: 153).

Any definition of agency that only speaks in terms of resistance and subversion necessarily excludes all actions and ways of being that do not fall within the subordination/subversion dichotomy. Drawing from Talal Asad, Mahmood (2001) rethinks the concept of religious women’s agency, proposing instead her theory of the “docile agent” and “docile conduct” (Mahmood 2001). Mahmood contends that the agentic capacity of the religious women she studied did not consist of acts of progressive change, but rather of acts aimed at “continuity, stasis and stability” (212), and of “the capacity to endure, suffer, persist” (223): “I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (203). In Mahmood’s understanding, women express their agency—or, in other words, their capacity for action—not in opposition to their religious beliefs and practices, but rather in compliance with their religious traditions (Mahmood 2001).

### **2.2.7 Orit Avishai and the “Doing Religion” Framework**

In “‘Doing Religion’ in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency”, Orit Avisahi (2008) the Jewish practice of *niddah* (which in Hebrew means “to be cast aside”) in the context of a group of 55 women. The period of *niddah* is a time when Jewish law forbids conjugal relations. It begins with the onset of menstruation and is completed with the woman’s immersion in a *mikvah*, a ritual pool of water. Most women in Avishai’s study are considered “ambivalent observers”, due mainly to their rejection of the *niddah*’s concept of impurity (416). Nevertheless, the women show a partial compliance with the practice (Avishai 2008).

To interpret these women’s experiences and practices, Avishai (2008) first explores three frames: subversion, complicity, and strategic compliance to religious norms. The first frame—“subversion”—equates agency to a lack of compliance with religious norms that are perceived as oppressive. The second frame—“comply, but ...”, or complicity—suggests that, although women perceive conservative religions (in this case, Judaism) as restricting or oppressive, they also feel empowered by them as they adapt them to their own lives through a so-called “partial compliance”. Last, but not least, the third frame—strategic compliance—analyses how women appropriate and exploit their religions to achieve extra-religious ends, such as “economic opportunities, domestic relations, political ideologies, and cultural affiliation” (Avishai 2008: 410–11).

However, Avishai (2008) feels all three frames are inappropriate and finds them unable to do justice to her respondents’ narratives. Not only do the first two models rely on the liberal and secular dichotomous assumption of submission/subversion—a “dichotomization of subordination and

subversion [that] equates agency with resistance” (412); the third frame also fails to acknowledge that “women may participate in conservative religions in a quest for *religious* ends or that ‘compliance’ is not strategic at all, but rather [is] a mode of conduct and being” (412, emphasis in original). Avishai therefore introduces a new conceptualization of religious agency, namely the idea of “doing religion”, which is based on “observance as the essence of orthodoxy” (422). In Avishai’s understanding, women express agency when they “do religion”—i.e. when they observe or perform a religious practice without pursuing extra-religious ends (413):

doing religion is a mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity—not only a purposeful or strategic action. I further suggest that even when viewed as a strategic undertaking, religion may be done in the pursuit of religious goals—in this case, the goal of becoming an authentic religious subject. (413)

In other words, religiosity can be defined as “a status that is learned, negotiated, and achieved by adhering to or performing prescribed practices that distinguish the religious from the nonreligious” (428). According to Avishai’s “doing religion” approach, agency hence embraces religion, for religion’s sake. Differently put, it is not a subversive strategy, but rather a mode of being where its members “‘do’—observe, perform—religion, wherever that might lead” (Avishai 2008: 429).

### **2.2.8 Sarah Bracke and Conceptualizing Religious Agency**

In “Conjugating the Modern/Religious, Conceptualizing Female Religious Agency Contours of a ‘Post-secular’ Conjuncture”, Sarah Bracke (2008) enters into a dialogue with Amy Hollywood, a feminist scholar who devoted great attention to medieval Christian mysticism from a gender perspective. Drawing from Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir, Hollywood (2004) contends that prophetic, visionary, or mystical experiences were the primary ways in which women claimed religious authority in medieval Christianity. In other words, mysticism could be considered as a means for religious women to express agency:

Almost every woman who produced religious writings in the Christian Middle Ages claimed to receive the authority for her teaching, and often the content of that teaching itself, directly from God. Submission of one’s own will to that of the divine was the precondition for women’s agency within the religious sphere, either in the form of textual production or institutional development and reform. (Hollywood 2004: 514)

The loss of self and adherence to the divine will added legitimacy to the textual production of medieval women, as did belief in the more fragile and passive nature of women, rendering them ideal sites of divine agency. Ultimately, therefore, women's agency was not ascribed to them, but to God (Hollywood 2004: 514–15). This happened for instance in Mechthild von Magdeburg's "Flowing Light", where the author humbles herself to receive God's voice and, consciously or unconsciously, seems to use "theological language to enable and mask her own agency" (Hollywood 2004: 516). In this respect, Hollywood (2004) argues:

If part of the project of women's history is to hear the other—in all of her alterity—we cannot unquestioningly presume that our own explanatory and descriptive categories are valid and those of our subject are invalid. Yet the dilemma—how to take seriously the agency of the other [...] when the other seems intent on ascribing her agency to God [...]—remains unresolved. (524)

According to Sarah Bracke (2008), Hollywood's idea that pious women turn to divine agency strategically to mask their own agency reveals "profound secular assumptions and epistemes in social, critical and feminist theory" (64) that miss the fundamental logic of what truly drives the compliant attitudes of pious women (62). She argues that from the 1990s onward, studies of women religious focused increasingly on women's agency, "to the extent that a 'metaphor of agency' (Bauer, 1997) has come to inform part of the scholarship" (62). This has led to an oversimplification of the concept of agency itself, as the latter became the equivalent of resistance to patriarchal social norms and of a struggle for freedom, as understood by western liberal cultures (Bracke 2008).

One of Bracke's (2008) ethnographic works focuses on Yasemin, a young Muslim woman adhering to Milli Görüs, an Islamic movement within the Turkish diaspora in Europe. Although a deeper exploration of the characteristics and history of the Milli Görüs movement is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is Yasemin's pious religious conduct and her desire to commit herself to God and to achieve a higher level of spirituality through great self-discipline that interests us here in the context of this dissertation (60). Bracke argues that her mode of expressing agency and subjectivity differs substantially from "liberal and secular economies of self and O/other" (60):

Reading Yasemin's narrative through a "metaphor of agency"—with a secular understanding of women's interests—draws attention to the ways in which Yasemin resists social pressures of various kinds, such as the expectation that she marry and establish a family. In other words, such a reading considers that, as Amy Hollywood (2004) puts it, theological language and a reference to divine agency is used in a strategic way to mask the pious women's own agency. This, however, misses out on the very logic of what drives Yasemin. (62)

Bracke contends that the “metaphor of agency” applied to women like Yasemin, alongside the concepts of “deficient subjectivity” and “false consciousness” (61) of religious women, are misleading because they reveal a way of interpreting religious women’s practices using western secular liberal categories that are distant from their lived experiences:

The turn to agency is problematic in various respects; it is important to investigate the theoretical work that “agency” performs. A problematic division of labour emerges in those studies on pious women that take a women’s studies approach to focus on agency in contrast to mainstream scholarship attending to structural power relations, including women’s oppression. (62)

The idea that religious women are oppressed and do not fight for equality and freedom, as western liberal feminists understand them, is therefore considered by Bracke as an oversimplification, since some religious women also fight for equality, but in different ways, while others may simply not want “the equality or freedom that liberal feminists stand for” (Midden and Ponzanesi 2013: 198). Yasemin’s agency, for example, is revealed in her quest to achieve a higher level of spirituality through profound self-discipline, without seeking other extra-religious aims.

It must be said that Bracke (2008) does not seem to delve any deeper into the specific historical context in which medieval religious women lived and operated. Furthermore, Bracke compares them to contemporary Islamic women adhering to the Milli Görüş movement, whose position and context are completely different from those of medieval women mystics. Nonetheless, I think she makes a valuable point for our discussion, namely that religious women’s agency is realized in their drive to reach a higher level of spirituality without necessarily exploiting religion strategically to achieve other goals.

To sum up, Mahmood, Avishai, and Bracke all challenge the liberatory and progressive assumptions of feminism and the often misunderstood logics of Islam and Judaism. They argue that the agency of religious women does not reside in exploiting religious principles and practices strategically, but rather in conforming to religious traditions and in becoming authentic religious subjects. Although all three scholars focus on the contemporary age and the dynamics of women’s emancipation and of secularization in this period are certainly not comparable to those of the seventeenth century, and their studies regard western as well as non-western religious traditions, I think that their frameworks of “compliant agency” could offer an interesting perspective via which to interpret the religious experience of our English Benedictine nuns, not least as the latter expressed their agency through, rather than despite, their religious belonging. On the one hand, we will see that they defended their



spiritual independence in the face of domineering superiors, not by subverting religious hierarchies, but by wittingly “conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour” (Weber 2016: 48). On the other hand, they developed their own mystical practices, building on medieval and contemporary contemplative life teachings.

Before proceeding, the term “mystical” requires a brief clarification (and will be further examined in subsequent chapters). As David Lunn (1975) writes, “strictly speaking, mysticism is the union of the soul with God, or the ultimate stages in the search of it, using self-denial and the prayer of contemplation for its attainment” (267). The way mysticism is conceived in this research is thus not concerned with extraordinary phenomena, such as visions or ecstasies, but rather with an internal union with God by means of prayer and contemplation.

The following section examines various ways to approach female mysticism as a form of agency from a gender studies perspective. I focus primarily on the positions of four feminist scholars: Caroline Walker Bynum, Marie-Florine Bruneau, Amy Hollywood, and Grace Jantzen.

### **2.2.9 Mysticism and Gender**

*Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* by Caroline Walker Bynum (1987) is a pioneering study on Christian female piety in the medieval age. It not only introduced the concept of gender into medieval studies, but also encouraged renewed interest in women mystics among historians of the period. Bynum contended that women’s spirituality in the thirteenth and fourteenth century was primarily enacted through the body and was characterized by a propensity for hyperbolic suffering and erotic mysticism. Furthermore, she noted the prominence of eucharistic devotion, food ascetism, feeding miracles, and food images. Bynum argued that this distinctively feminine form of somatic piety did not consist of extreme forms of ascetism or masochism, but rather was realized in efforts to obtain power and meaning (Bynum 1987: 208). It was a creative response of women to the loss of sacerdotal and temporal powers that occurred with the Gregorian Reform of the twelfth century, when women no longer had access to the public sphere and to missionary tasks, and instead were forced to perform in a domestic environment and “on the intimate landscape of their own bodies” (Weber 2012: 318).

Bynum, however, also believed that although women certainly internalized the negative cultural assumptions of their time, which associated them with sinful flesh (in contrast to rational and spiritual men), “medieval conceptions of the body were not strictly dualistic and misogynist” (Weber 2012: 318). As a matter of fact, the human body—both male and female—was associated with Jesus’ humanity, who took and redeemed flesh, elevating the body to the glory of the resurrection and to eternal life. Therefore, women’s somatic spirituality also had, in Bynum’s understanding, a strong

“transcendental significance” (Weber 2012: 318). “To women, the notion of the female as flesh became an argument for women's *imitatio Christi* through physicality” (Weber 2012: 263).

[Women] saw themselves not as flesh opposed to spirit, female opposed to male, nurture opposed to authority; they saw themselves as human beings— fully spirit and fully flesh. And they saw all humanity as created in God's image, as capable of *imitatio Christi* through body as well as soul. (Weber 2012: 296)

Historians, philosophers, and scholars of medieval mysticism, such as Sarah Beckwith and Jo Ann McNamara, drew from Bynum, but were more skeptical in attributing a positive significance to women's embodied spirituality. Moreover, they underlined the restricted sphere in which women could make their voices heard and the difficulty they experienced when trying to escape male clerical control (Weber 2012: 319). Scholars of early modern mysticism also challenged the interpretation of women's spirituality exclusively in terms of bodily images and language (Weber 2012: 320).

In “Women Mystics Confront the Modern World”, the French historian and literary scholar Marie-Florine Bruneau (1998) studied the two mystic writers Marie de l'Incarnation-Guyart (1599–1672) and Madame Guyon (1648–1717). Bruneau agreed with Bynum that “sensory mysticism allowed female mystics a charismatic power and access to transcendence otherwise denied to them” (222). Yet she questioned Bynum's idea that female somatic piety is a natural female disposition and a source of empowerment, as it reiterates an identification of women with the “wicked flesh” (222). Therefore, instead of contrasting misogyny and patriarchy, for Bruneau at least, somatic piety seems to reinforce it (Bruneau 1998: 222).

In *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, Amy Hollywood (1995) also underlined the limits of Bynum's approach, contending that women may have felt compelled to describe their spirituality in embodied terms as they were not permitted to use intellectual language. She explored the writings of medieval mystics such as the Beguine, Hadewijch of Antwerp (twelfth–thirteenth century), Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1207–c. 1282/1294), Marguerite Porete (1250/60–1310), and the Cistercian Gertrude of Helfta (1256–1302). Hollywood proved how their writings did not show such richness as the religious women analyzed by Bynum in penitential asceticism and paramystical phenomena (Weber 2012: 319). Porete, for example, was burnt at the stake for her work “Mirror of Simple Souls”, in which she outlined a speculative and anti-visionary spirituality. Hollywood then proposed a variety of perspectives via which to approach women's spirituality, not just the embodied perspective offered by Bynum (Hollywood 1995).

In “Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism”, Grace Jantzen (1995) added another important element to the analysis of Christian women’s mysticism. She argued that mysticism was a “social construction” (12) related to issues of power, authority, and gender. She reconstructed (or rather deconstructed) the traditional history of Christian mysticism and, in doing so, demonstrated how women came to be considered “naturally more spiritual than men” (17–18). This led to a confinement of “both the “feminine” and the “spiritual” to “a context in which they are rendered thoroughly ineffectual” (17–18)—a confinement that began with the scientific revolution and grew during the Enlightenment and the Post-Enlightenment, when religion in general was reduced to philosophy’s binary opposite and mysticism was increasingly subjectivized, depoliticized, and described in terms of an ineffable experience (Jantzen 1995).

Jantzen (1995) begins her historical overview with an examination of the noun “mysticism”—a relatively modern French term that emerged in the seventeenth century. The adjectives “mystic” or “mystical”, however, are far more ancient. Derived from Greek, the terms “mystic” and “mystical” were used to designate those who had devoted themselves to secret rituals and mystery religions (23). In Christian Platonism, the mystical or spiritual came to mean all that lay “beyond ordinary sense perception and the normal means of human knowledge” (324). In classical Greece, reason and the principle of life are identified with maleness, whereas femaleness is associated with the body, the clouding of the mind, and with passivity. These connections had a strong impact on the history of Christian spirituality (30). Jantzen argues that in patristic writings, “women are to be identified with flesh and the earth and men are to be identified with reason and spirit” (43). As a consequence, spirituality came to be considered as a “male preserve” (56–57). Moving to the early Christian tradition, the term “mystical” was used to refer to “the hidden meaning of scripture, the meaning which saw its connection to Christ rather than only its literal truth” (331). The shift in using the term “mystical” for initiation rites, to the mystical meaning of the Bible, confined both spirituality and mysticism to maleness. Except in a small number of exceptional cases, women were not generally educated enough to access the Scriptures, nor were they allowed to teach or to claim any authority to discern the mystical meaning of the Sacred texts (324). In this context, some women in the high Middle Ages, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Gertrude of Helfta, and Hadewijch of Antwerp, claimed to have contact with God through visionary or ecstatic experiences, regarding such experiences as a central aspect of their spirituality and the basis for their authority (168):

An alternative source of authority about the mysteries of God might come by visions, a direct communication of God to the most humble creatures of divine creation. Since women were those who could be seen as most like “the handmaiden of the Lord”, they might, ironically, be most likely to be privileged with a vision of the mysteries of God. (324)

In this respect, Hildegard of Bingen marked an important transition in the social construction of mysticism: although she believed that men were the ones to be considered mystical, because of their laxity, God communicated to her by means of visions, rather than by prayers or study of the Scriptures (325). Jantzen contended that women internalized the low esteem in which they were held—a problem made worse by their lack of education and ecclesiastical position. Hence, women required a particular form of validation, such as visionary or ecstatic experiences, if they were to claim any authority (169). However, as such, spirituality was marginalized in western mysticism and came under men’s control (Jantzen 1995: 169).

Jantzen (1995) contends that visions, locutions, and other extraordinary experiences of direct contact with God were increasingly viewed with great suspicion by western medieval male clerical authorities and were highly discouraged and strictly controlled (189). The true mystical experience thus became a male prerogative (187). For example, the anonymous author of “The Cloud of Unknowing”, written in England in the fourteenth century, denounced those who searched for visionary or ecstatic mystical experiences and linked the latter with heresy (191). It was therefore only a modest step to the Inquisition in the late medieval and early modern period to search for, and condemn, false mystical experiences as the “demonic counterpart of communication with God” (325). Consequently, thousands of women and some men were accused of heresy and burned at the stake. Commenting on this historical moment, Jantzen affirms:

The connection of power and gender in the social construction of mysticism could hardly have been made clearer than in this condemnation and slaughter of those who were considered, as false mystics, to be sufficiently threatening to church and society to justify their examination. (325–26)

Moving on towards the Enlightenment, and especially the work of Immanuel Kant, mysticism became philosophy’s polar opposite since any attempt of the human mind to transcend objective reality was considered a form of self-deception. As a result, the importance of mysticism declined both publicly and politically (Jantzen 1995).

As Jantzen (1995) explains, Friedrich Schleiermacher and his fellow religious Romantics tried to escape the limitations imposed by Kant, arguing instead that, although God could not be discovered rationally, it was possible to “experience God in pure preconceptual consciousness” and this experience was “available only to those who will enter into themselves and recognise their own innermost feelings” (344). In Schleiermacher’s understanding, this subjectivity was not limited to women. Rather, it was a feature of all humanity (344). However, since women were traditionally

associated with stronger emotional tendencies, they became the ideal candidates to be regarded as mystics, and mysticism came to be understood as mainly a subjective state (Jantzen 1995: 345).

In Post-Enlightenment philosophy and modern thinking, Jantzen (1995) continues, especially thanks to the work of William James, the religious experience was increasingly privatized, and mysticism became subjectivized, “depoliticized”, and “seen in terms of private, subjective experience only, whose main characteristic is ineffability” (23–24). Such an understanding of mysticism led to its domestication and detachment from the public sphere and the political realm (345). Jantzen affirms:

The privatized, subjectivised ineffable mysticism of William James and his followers is open to women as well as to men; but it plays directly into the hands of modern bourgeois political and gender assumptions. It keeps God (and women) safely out of politics and the public realm; it allows mysticism to flourish as a secret inner life. (346)

To conclude, it could be said that the author identifies the essence of mysticism in a “patriarchal construct”, of which women must always be aware and suspicious (Jantzen 1995: 347).

What Bynum, Bruneau, Hollywood, and Jantzen all seem to have in common is their search for a specific form of religious women’s mysticism. They ask if there is a specifically female spiritual language and, if so, what it is that characterizes the female way of relating with God. As Patricia Ranft (1998) demonstrated in “Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe”, the history of Catholicism teaches us that women have been extremely creative in following their internal calling: alongside women whose mysticism was somatic, like the Dominican Catherine of Siena and the Carmelite Teresa of Avila, there were others who, as Hollywood pointed out, developed a more speculative and anti-visionary spirituality. This applies for example to the Beguines of the thirteenth century and to others who, like Mary Ward, devoted themselves to active or apostolic service instead, when the latter was not closed to them. I therefore believe that Bynum and Bruneau only addressed one side of the problem, as somatic piety was not the only spiritual life open to women religious.

Hence, somatic piety should not, and indeed cannot, be considered the only existing female disposition in religious life. Moreover, somatization and, more specifically, nuptial mysticism, was also experienced by men, an example being Constantine Barbanson, Eckhart (and his followers Tauler and Suso), and later John of the Cross. I would therefore agree that it is not a matter of an intellectual more elevated spirituality versus an affective, less elevated spirituality, where the former is typically associated with the male and the former with the female. Rather, it concerns a diversity of callings felt by women and men and in which they found fulfilment.

For this reason, while I partially agree with Jantzen's approach (I praise her accurate historical reconstruction and I am convinced that mysticism did involve complex dynamics of power, authority, and gender), I also believe that female mystical experiences cannot be dismissed as a way of strategizing only—in other words, as a means for women to be seen and heard, and for men to silence them or to render them socially and politically ineffectual. Rather, I think that each female spiritual experience should be contextualized, also in its specific spiritual tradition, in order to understand its full value and message in a particular historical moment. I believe a “third way” is possible: some women might eventually have chosen a somatic spirituality because they felt fulfilled by it, while others felt more represented by a speculative spiritual path. In both cases, what interests me is to fully grasp women's spiritual language and their way of relating with God, without necessarily attaching a specific social or political value to it.

I agree with Bynum (1987) when she argues that the different forms of food and body control of medieval women cannot be interpreted only in accordance with modern disease frameworks, such as *anorexia nervosa*. If one wants to understand their true meaning and value, the complexity of behavior expressed by medieval women and men—their symbols and convictions—need to be placed in their full historical context from which they are, after all, inseparable (298). As Bynum argued, only “by considering all the meanings and functions of medieval practice and belief can we explain medieval experience without removing its creativity and dignity” (298–99). Her approach here “clearly assumes that the practices and symbols of any culture are so embedded in that culture as to be inseparable from it” (Bynum 1987: 299). Hence the purpose of this dissertation is also to place the life experiences, religious writings, and contemplative paths of the English Benedictine nuns of Cambrai into their full historical context. While feminist perspectives on agency and mysticism can and do offer useful means to interpret them, in my opinion, they are inseparable from a diligent historical approach.

Going back to Bracke's ideas outlined in the introduction to this chapter, I also think that the metaphor of agency applied to religious women could be misleading because it implies a way of interpreting religious women's practices using western secular liberal categories, which might be distant from their actual lived experiences and goals (Bracke 2008: 61). My aim is to make visible women's feelings, their internal dispositions—their callings—and to understand the means, or the persons, that enabled (or impeded) them. On this last point, I think Jantzen's and the other feminist readings of Christian women's mysticism do offer a useful contribution via which to investigate the complex gender and power dynamics existing inside Benedictine early modern monasteries, and how those dynamics influenced the spiritual paths taken by (and available to) women.

## 2.3 Methodology

The methodological approach I adopt in this dissertation draws from literary analysis and historical research in the light of women's and gender studies. As a historical intervention, the dissertation is grounded in Joan Scott's (1986) approach to historical analysis based on "gender" as an analytic category, alongside those of race and class. Based on perceived differences between the sexes, and as a primary way of signifying relationships of power, Scott affirmed that gender was a constitutive element of social relationships. She therefore encouraged historical analyses that investigate the effects of gender in social and institutional relationships, considering gender as a primary field within which, or by means of which, power is articulated (Scott 1986). This perspective offers a particularly useful way to understand the gender and power dynamics in English Benedictine early modern convents and the relationship between women religious and male spiritual directors.

In this dissertation, I will employ an intersectional approach to study the different dimensions of the experiences of women religious in English Benedictine convents in exile in the early modern period. According to the methodology of intersectionality, "we need to interrogate not only the social conditions in which women have acted, or have been acted, as subjects, but how, when and where this has happened" (Crisafulli and Golinelli 2019: 3). First, the nuns at the center of our study were early modern women and lived in a historical context in which female voices were usually not expressed, not least as most women were illiterate (Vives 2000). Second, they were Catholic under the penal laws in England after Henry VIII's schism with Rome. Finally, they were exiled on the Continent. Different dimensions must therefore be considered in our analysis, namely their being "Catholics and contemplatives, Englishwomen and exiles" (Lay 2016: 96). These dimensions will be debated in the following chapter, which contextualizes English Benedictine convents in exile in the early modern period and provides detailed information about the life of cloistered women religious in the counter-Reformation period.

The primary texts featured in this research are of a religious or spiritual nature, comprising both manuscripts and printed material. They include commentaries to the Scriptures, the Divine Office, and to spiritual authors, as well as personal meditations and poems. The texts are in English, although they do contain many quotations in Latin, revealing the deep erudition of their female authors. The English language of the manuscripts is comprehensible, hence the reading did not require any early modern paleographic study, although a number of orthographical variations required prior familiarization.<sup>13</sup> When possible, quotations from manuscripts maintain the original early modern

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<sup>13</sup> The twenty-first-century series *Analecta Cartusiana*, edited by James Hogg, Alain Girard, and Daniel Blévec, and published by the *Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg*, Austria, offered a valid companion to better understand the language of early modern texts by English Benedictine nuns, particularly of Gertrude More and Augustine Baker.

English spelling. Translations into modern English have been provided in square brackets next to each word only when the original spelling could impede the understanding.

Regarding the manuscripts, the dissertation did require significant archival work to build the corpus of primary texts. From this perspective, it follows in the footsteps of second-wave feminist efforts to rediscover and unearth “texts by women which have either been lost or ignored” (Kolodny 1975: 88–89).

In the case of Barbara Constable’s manuscripts, it must be noted that currently, the Colwich manuscripts are inaccessible, as they are in temporary storage at Stanbrook Abbey due to an intended merger of Colwich with Stanbrook, which began during the corona virus pandemic. For this reason, *Speculum Superiorum*<sup>14</sup> (1650), which addressed the then abbess Catherine Gascoigne, could not be included in this research. Furthermore, the manuscript entitled *A Spiritual Treatise, conteininge some advise for seculars* (1663) and dedicated to Constable’s eldest brother, Sir Marmaduke, was neither at the East Riding Archives nor at the Hull History Center when requested—its location is currently unknown.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, this manuscript is also excluded from my analysis. Despite these issues, many of Constable’s manuscripts were successfully located and sent to me in digitized form by the archivists. The corona virus pandemic imposed obvious difficulties with travelling during the years of my PhD and most archives were closed for an extended period.

As previously stated, the close reading of the texts was approached from a feminist perspective on religious women’s agency and mysticism. The latter were chosen to shed new light on texts that are well known by historians of women religious, but which could reveal interesting dynamics of gender and power when analyzed from such a perspective. The dissertation thus contributes to feminist attempts to re-read “an old text from a new critical direction” (Rich 1972: 18).

## 2.4 Positioning

As Crisafulli and Golinelli (2019) affirm, women’s and gender studies remind us that “the act of reading always entails a complex interaction between the gender of the writer, the text and the reader, in which the gender of the latter is not irrelevant either” (5). The aim of this section is to clarify how I relate to the manuscripts and printed texts under analysis, and what feelings they engender from my own position as reader.

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<sup>14</sup> “*Speculum Superiorum*, Composed of diuerse Collections taken out of the liues & workes of holie persons, by the most vnworthy Religious Sr. Bar: Con: of Jesus” (December 2, 1650) (xviii + 502 pp.) Dedicated to: Abbess Catherine Gascoigne Colwich Abbey, MS H43.

<sup>15</sup> “*A Spiritual Treatise, containing some advice for seculars* composed by the unworthy Religious Sister B.C. of Jesus of the holy Order of St. Benedict in the monastery of Our Lady of Consolation in Cambray of the English Congregation” (finished June 16, 1663) (638 pp.) Dedicated to: Sir Marmaduke Constable Everingham Park (last known location).



First, I would like to say that I approach the texts from a precise position: I am a western, white woman with a Catholic affiliation. I therefore share a similar cultural background to that of More, Constable, and Gascoigne—something I believe allows me to have a deeper understanding of their personal reflections and comments, as well as of their position as women inside the Roman Catholic Church.

Since II Vatican Council (1962–65), women have received greater attention from the clergy, although certain aspects of their spiritual life are still mediated by males, such as their access to the Sacraments, Confession, and the Eucharist. This provoked me to investigate the voices of women religious further, in particular, the development of their personal spirituality in relation to their male directors. I wanted to understand if and how the gender dynamics of power impacted on the individual pursuing a spiritual path and if they offered women a chance to achieve full agency.

I also wanted to delve into the use and existence of specifically female spiritual language to understand if there is a female way of relating with God and, if so, what that might look like. Concerning this final point, this dissertation should obviously be considered an initial and partial contribution to what would be, in my view, a very promising and stimulating area of future research.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The first part of this chapter showed how the concept of religious women's agency in conservative religious traditions is multi-faceted and complex, and how it often responds to a specific western liberal and secular standpoint, which generally perceives religious women's values not only as threatening to the feminist agenda, but also as based on resistance to any form of oppression. However, the examination of compliant models of agency, such as those proposed by Saba Mahmood, Orit Avishai, and Sarah Bracke, proved that many religious women showed agentic capacity not against, but precisely through their religious belonging, thus challenging the liberatory and progressive assumptions of feminism and the often misunderstood logics of conservative religions.

One specific way for religious women to express their agency was through mystical or contemplative spiritual practices. Feminist readings of women's mysticism in the second part of the chapter illuminated the complex dynamics of gender and power that revolved around female spirituality. Although Bynum's theory of a distinctively female somatic piety has become the accepted reading of medieval women's mysticism, several scholars have critiqued and nuanced her approach in a variety of ways. Bruneau, for example, questioned Bynum's idea that female somatic spirituality was both a natural disposition of women and a source of empowerment for them. Hollywood was also critical of what she saw as an oversimplification of women's spirituality and warned against an overly simplistic reading of embodied spirituality that failed to consider the social

norms to which women were expected to conform. Jantzen further enriched the discussion by suggesting that the idea of mysticism was a social construction related to issues of power, authority, and gender.

I argued that all these positions seem to address only one side of the problem, and I proposed another interpretative way, namely that of a diversity of women's callings. In other words, I contended that it was not only a matter of a more elevated male spirituality versus a less elevated female one, but rather a matter of a diversity of callings, which women felt, and which orientated them toward a more somatic or more speculative piety instead. However, I do agree with Jantzen that gender and power dynamics played a role in helping or, to the contrary, impeding the expression of women's internal dispositions.

### 3 Context

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a historical overview of seventeenth-century English Benedictine nuns in exile. Different dimensions will be considered, namely, their being Catholics and English, their belonging to a specific religious contemplative order of women, and, last but not least, their being exiles on the Continent (Lay 2016: 96). The first part of the chapter will briefly reconstruct the historical trajectory of Catholicism in England in the early modern era. Houses for English Catholic women religious on the Continent will then be examined in the second part of the chapter, with a focus on the Benedictine order. The following research questions will be addressed: Who founded these houses? Who exactly lived in them? How was the network of these houses formed? What were their life rules? What meaning can we draw from the lives of these women in exile? I will contend that their enclosed lifestyle and the religious rule under which they lived greatly impacted their capacity for action. The third and final section of the chapter focuses specifically on the Benedictine monastery of “Our Lady of Consolation” in the city of Cambrai (originally Flanders, now France), where Gertrude More, Catherine Gascoigne, and Barbara Constable took their vows, lived, and wrote.

#### 3.2 Historical Overview of Catholicism in England in the Early Modern Period<sup>16</sup>

Henry VII Tudor ascended to the throne of England in 1485, having defeated Richard III and ended the now infamous Wars of the Roses—a protracted conflict that lasted over thirty years (1455–1485 /1487?). His second-born, Henry VIII, was not initially destined to be king, but rather to become the archbishop of Canterbury, the highest ecclesiastical title in England. It was Henry’s brother, Arthur, who was crowned instead, but he died prematurely at fifteen and therefore Henry was eventually crowned king on 29 June 1509 after marrying Catherine of Aragon (Sala 2008: 13–14).

Henry VIII could initially be defined as a Renaissance *princeps*: he was tall, handsome, athletic, a skillful knight and fencer. In addition, he was a man of wide culture, a great musician, and competent in theology. Queen Catherine of Aragon was as talented as her husband and stood as a point of reference for many humanists of the time. The king promoted a cultural renaissance: Renaissance poetry was popular at court, with Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) and the Earl of Surrey Henry Howard (1517–1547) introducing the Petrarchan sonnet in English literature, importing it directly from Italy (Sala 2008: 15–16). In 1521, Henry wrote *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, in

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<sup>16</sup> The contents of this paragraph were presented on 13 May 2019 at a UNIBO lecture of the course “English Literature 1”, taught by Prof. Serena Baiesi. The title of the lecture was “I cattolici e la Riforma Anglicana”.

answer to Martin Luther's *De Captivitate Babylonica*, and in condemnation of church corruption. Henry's book was welcomed by the press across Europe and a copy was even presented to Pope Leo X, who conferred to Henry the title of *Fidei Defensor* [Defender of the Faith] for his service in defense of the Church (Sala 2008: 38–39).

In his book *Henry VIII*, John Joseph Scarisbrick (1972: 28) asserts that England was the best governed and least inclined to revolt state in the whole of Christianity at that time. On a similar theme, Raymond Wilson Chambers (1967: 99) adds that what immediately struck the foreign visitor to England at that time, besides the wealth of its capital city, was the beauty of that green country, literally studded with art treasures, in particular churches and monasteries. However, in a few years' time, Henry would destroy almost all the medieval artistic heritage of his homeland and realize a brutal arrest of humanism: Wyatt was sent to the Tower, Surrey was beheaded, and neither saw the publication of his poetry (which only happened at least ten years after the king's death). Moreover, misfortune befell wealthy protectors of artists and university centers, among them Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Protector of the King. Many humanists, such as Erasmus, chose to leave the country, never to return (Sala 2008: 16).

These were only some of the consequences of the so-called Anglican schism, which officially began in 1534 with the Acts of Succession and Supremacy. The former was an unofficial Act of Supremacy which declared the princess Mary illegitimate, positioning Ann Boleyn's children as first in line to the throne. With this act, the king assumed the right to nominate his successor, and all the king's subjects were forced to pledge allegiance to it or risk imprisonment and the loss of their property. The well-known Act of Supremacy, issued upon Pope Clement VII's refusal to annul the marriage between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, proclaimed the king as supreme head of the Church of England, therefore extinguishing papal authority (Sala 2008: 89–90). In February 1535, the Act of Treason was issued, according to which any form of dissent, even verbal, was considered high treason.

High treason was the worst possible crime—more serious even than heresy—and was generally punished with public hanging, whereas the stake was reserved for heretics and women. Before the hanged died, they were disemboweled, their innards thrown into fire or boiling water or even to the ground, so that the public could stamp on them to show their disdain. The heart of the convict was then removed, and the head and limbs were impaled as an *exemplum*. In addition, all the money and properties of those found guilty of high treason automatically passed to the crown (Sala 2008: 108–10). Nobles and the most renowned generally escaped this form of punishment and were beheaded instead.

In 1535, some of the most cultured people of the country, such as Thomas More and John Fisher, were charged with high treason and publicly executed. In *The Religious Orders in England*, David Knowles (1959: 196) argues that the situation for many people in England was so perilous that it could not be compared with any other period of British history. Women were no exception: Elizabeth Barton, a Benedictine nun in the monastery of St. Sepulchre in Canterbury (Kent), known to her contemporaries as “The Holy Maid of Kent” because of her divine revelations, was initially highly esteemed by Henry VIII, who even received her at court. However, after she spread divine revelations according to which the king would have lost the throne if he had divorced Catherine of Aragon and married another woman, she was accused of falsehood and of fomenting an uprising against the crown. Notwithstanding John Fisher’s and Thomas More’s testimonies of her pious life, Elizabeth was eventually hanged for high treason and beheaded at the age of only twenty-eight (Sala 2008: 118–20).

The case of Elizabeth Barton deserves attention, both for the hostile and often misogynous reading of her life and prophecies and, alternatively, for the dismissal of her case by the critics who surrounded her. Diane Watt (1997: 54) argued that while this silence might be gender-based, it was also related to a more general interest in scholarship for the political dynamics surrounding the Reformation, instead of religious ones. In “Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England”, Watt (1997) contends that the case of Barton was far from isolated and uninfluential. Quite the contrary, it was rooted in a long tradition, which, from the Middle Ages to the Civil War, saw women prophets as active protagonists, also of the political scene of their time. Margery Kempe, Anne Askew, Lady Eleanor Davies, and other women cited by John Foxe in his “Acts and Monuments” are only a few examples of women prophets who fulfilled such an influential role and, moving to a more international context, Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Bridget of Sweden, and Saint Catherine of Siena certainly deserve a mention (Watt 1997).

In 1536, Catherine of Aragon died and Ann Boleyn was sentenced to death. Henry then married his third wife, Jane Seymour, and issued the Second Act of Succession, which also defined the refusal to swear allegiance to the Act of Supremacy (and the refusal to answer questions related to it) as high treason (Sala 2008: 125). In 1537, Henry ordered the publication of a new Bible in English, the text of which was very closely based on Tyndale’s translation. All parishes were forced to adopt this new version (Sala 2008: 192).

The period between 1536 and 1540 is known in British history as the dissolution of the monasteries and religious orders. About eight hundred monasteries and religious houses were literally dismantled by the king and all their precious furniture, libraries, and other artistic objects were either sold, destroyed, or burnt. This is the fate that befell Tintern Abbey, founded by the Cistercians in

1131 and mentioned by both Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Another example was Glastonbury Benedictine Abbey, which was used as a stone quarry after all its monks had been brutally killed. The Abbey was one of the largest and most beautiful in Europe and, according to legend, it welcomed Joseph of Arimathea with the Saint Graal [Holy Grail] and contained the oldest Marian inscription in Europe. Another Abbey worthy of mention here is Walsingham, a monastery of Augustinian canons regular in Walsingham, Norfolk. The priory was known for housing a Marian shrine with a replica of the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth (Sala 2008: 153–65). A ballad, possibly composed by Philip Howard, a descendant of the poet Henry Howard, described its destruction thus:

*In the wracks of Walsingham  
Whom should I choose  
But the Queen of Walsingham  
to be my guide and muse.*

*Then, thou Prince of Walsingham,  
Grant me to frame  
Bitter plaints to rue thy wrong,  
Bitter woe for thy name.*

*Bitter was it so to see  
The seely sheep  
Murdered by the ravenous wolves  
While the shepherds did sleep.*

*Bitter was it, O to view  
The sacred vine,  
Whilst the gardeners played all close,  
Rooted up by the swine.*

*Bitter, bitter, O to behold  
The grass to grow  
Where the walls of Walsingham  
So stately did show.*

*Such were the worth of Walsingham  
While she did stand,  
Such are the wracks as now do show  
Of that Holy Land.*

*Level, level, with the ground  
The towers do lie,  
Which, with their golden glittering tops,  
Pierced once to the sky.*

*Where were gates are no gates now,  
The ways unknown  
Where the press of peers did pass  
While her fame was blown.*

*Owls do shriek where the sweetest hymns  
Lately were sung,  
Toads and serpents hold their dens  
Where the palmers did throng.*

*Weep, weep, O Walsingham,  
Whose days are nights,  
Blessings turned to blasphemies,  
Holy deeds to despites.*

*Sin is where Our Lady sat,  
Heaven is turned to hell,  
Satan sits where Our Lord did sway—  
Walsingham, O farewell! (Sala 2008: 226–27)*

I think this ballad makes visible through the poetic word how, when Henry VIII was crowned, England was a “treasure house of art” (Chambers 1967: 377), with numerous Catholic churches, whereas, at the time of the king’s death, the country was in ruins.

Another immediate and practical effect of the dissolution of the monasteries was the great number thrown into poverty—those who were previously looked after by the monks, and who were now alone, and the elderly and the sick who were suddenly deprived of the cures they received from the religious in the city hospitals (Sala 2008: 163).

On 28 January 1547, Henry VIII died. He was succeeded by Edward VI, who ascended to the throne at the age of only nine. Due to his young age, he could not exert any real royal power. Therefore, he was supported by a regency council, which favored the transition of the Anglican Church of England into a truly Protestant or, better still, a philo-Calvinist and Zwinglian institution. This transition came about mainly thanks to Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury from 1533, who was left free to express and institutionalize his beliefs (Sala 2008: 205). In 1549, for example, the Book of Common Prayer, written by Cranmer, was published and subsequently imposed upon the people. It contained the only prayers and rituals authorized by the crown, marked the end of Latin as a liturgical language, and abolished all missals, lectionaries, antiphonals, and books of hours<sup>17</sup> of the time, which had previously been widely used (Sala 2008: 206). Historians seem to generally agree that Edward's reign was, all things considered, a social disaster. There were widespread state-sanctioned raids on private properties, growing poverty, a general malaise in government, unsuccessful wars, a national financial crisis (which almost bankrupted the country), the devaluation of an already poor currency, widespread disorder and, last but not least, a general sense of unhappiness (Hughes 1955: 150).

However, this period was short-lived, as was the reign of King Edward, who died aged only fifteen in 1553 and was succeeded by Mary Tudor. Soon afterwards, the first parliament was opened, and it proclaimed the validity of the marriage between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. Moreover, it abolished the Book of Common Prayer and restored the Mass in Latin, albeit now without any penalties for those who refused to celebrate it. The marriage of the clergy was abolished, but there was no mention of the papal authority. Mary, despite her attempt to restore Catholicism, paradoxically remained the supreme head of the Church (Sala 2010: 41). In 1554, she married Philip II of Spain and England returned to the auspices of the Holy See. The following year, a new law on heresy was issued that again led to the persecution of those who fell fowl of the church.

Thanks to John Foxe's "The Acts and Monuments of the Church: Containing the History and Sufferings of the Martyrs", commonly known as the "Book of Martyrs", Mary Tudor is now universally known as "Bloody Mary"—a cruel, dull, and incompetent queen who transformed her homeland into a bloodbath and led it to bankruptcy (Sala 2010: 47).<sup>18</sup> The historical facts seem to be

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<sup>17</sup> The book of hours is a Christian devotional book used to pray the canonical hours.

<sup>18</sup> The "Book of Martyrs" was published for the first time in Latin in 1559 after Queen Mary Tudor's death. The second edition in English, composed of eight books, was published later in 1563.



rather different, however. A recent study by Linda Porter (2007), for example, reevaluates Mary's reign, arguing that it was, in fact, a period of good governance in which, following the devastation wrought by Henry VIII and Edward VI, there were clear signs of a new beginning. Mary was a Tudor, and, like her father and siblings, she had benefitted from an excellent education. Moreover, her mother, Catherine, raised her to be fully aware of the role she would one day assume. Mary loved beauty, elegance, music, theatre, and art. Her court invested heavily in dresses, jewelry, and culture and it was merry, as Mary reintroduced the popular celebrations that revolved around the parishes. Moreover, Mary published the first Renaissance poetic anthology in 1557—the well-known “Tottel's Miscellany”—which officially introduced the sonnet to England. Finally, she encouraged geographical explorations and commissioned the Atlas of Queen Mary in 1555 as a gift for her husband (Sala 2010: 45–46).

Turning now to the so-called Marian fires,<sup>19</sup> Cobbett (1994: 106) believes they were exaggerated. In Foxe's book, 169 out of 273 total victims were merely names, since the author did not provide any other historical proof of their existence and/or details about their condemnation. Furthermore, 832 pages out of a total of 1302 in the Book of Martyrs were devoted to the profiles of only 17 victims, the most famous and renowned at the time, among them the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer (1520–1556), and a bishop of London, Nicholas Ridley (1500–1555), who were burned at the stake during the Marian persecutions (Sala 2010: 49–50). However, the latter also committed crimes in contexts other than religious—for example, they declared the queen a “bastard” and were involved in the Northumberland plot.<sup>20</sup> As for the others, some were criminals, or they belonged to different confessions and were condemned for heresies other than challenging the monarch's supremacy and/or the Book of Common Prayer. For instance, the anabaptists were persecuted by all European governments—both Catholics and Protestants—as dangerous subversives (Sala 2010: 49–50). Notwithstanding the above, Cobbett (1994: 99) argued that for every drop of blood spilled by Mary, her successor, Elizabeth, would have spilled a pint.

Mary died in 1558 and Elizabeth was officially crowned queen a year later, in 1559. In that same year, Elizabeth issued renewed Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity. The former abolished the Marian reform, and the latter reintroduced the Protestant liturgy and the Book of Common Prayer, (re)imposing it upon the people. A new schism ensued with yet another fierce persecution against the Catholics. The Act of Supremacy and the Book of Common Prayer were presented to the clergy, who were expected to swear an oath of allegiance. Those who refused stood to lose everything and

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<sup>19</sup> By the term “Marian fires” we mean that Mary condemned Protestants to be burnt at the stake (Cobbett 1994).

<sup>20</sup> John Dudley, first Duke of Northumberland (1504–1553), was an English general, admiral, and politician who led the government of the young King Edward VI from 1550 until 1553, and unsuccessfully tried to install Lady Jane Grey on the English throne after the king's death.

languish in prison until their deaths. Various penalties were then applied to all those who frequented the Catholic Mass and to the Anglican ministers who celebrated Christ's Last Supper as the ancient Mass. Regarding those who maintained the pope's supremacy, anyone who defended the pope would first forfeit any property they might own. Second, they would be sentenced to prison and, third, they would be condemned as high traitors. Everyone was forced to take part in the Sunday Anglican ceremony, and those who did not attend were fined twelve pence (a four-days salary for a worker, or two-days salary for a specialized artisan) to be paid every Sunday (Sala 2010: 74). Last but not least, Elizabeth introduced book censorship and the obligation to have an episcopal license to preach to the public. Elizabeth decreed that every parish should finally have a Protestant Bible in English, Edward's homilies edited by Cranmer, and Foxe's Book of Martyrs. In 1563, Elizabeth restored the religious rules previously abolished by Mary: she dissolved the re-born monasteries and published the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, thus abolishing Purgatory, prohibited the cult of relics and of sacred images, proclaimed the Bible as the only source of the faith, and authorized priests and bishops to marry. In other words, what began as the rejection of papal supremacy under Henry VIII, was now turned into a reform of the Catholic doctrine by his daughter, Elizabeth, who strove to contrast and dissolve every trace of the so-called old religious tradition (Sala 2010: 68–75).

The year 1563 also saw more severe penalties for those who did not conform to the Anglican Church: the oath of allegiance was imposed upon all parliamentarians, lawyers, sheriffs, local governors, and teachers, whether public or private. A refusal implied treason for a first offence and high treason for a second (Sala 2010: 77). The situation in England became so critical that on 25 February 1570, Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth as a heretic and persecutor of the Catholics with the papal bull "Regnans in excelsis" (Sala 2010: 106). However, for the Catholic people, the worst was yet to come. In 1581 the anti-Catholic persecutions intensified and the crime of recusancy passed from the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts to that of state tribunals. From that moment onward Catholicism became a crime and all Catholic priests were considered guilty of high treason, together with all laymen and women who offered hospitality to them or refused to give information about them (Sala 2010: 152–54). From 1585, the mere presence of a Catholic priest on English soil was punishable by death (Sala 2010: 181). From 1577 to 1603, 188 people were sentenced to death exclusively on religious grounds, only later to be elevated to the honor of the altars by the Church<sup>21</sup> (Sala 2010: 182).

Notwithstanding the imprisonments, expropriations, torture, and executions, many Catholics still refused to reject their faith and hence the Five Mile Act of 1593 was introduced in an attempt to punish them further. All adult Catholics, those already deprived of political rights and of the right to

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<sup>21</sup> They were venerated as saints by the Catholic Church.

education, were now subject to house arrest and could not venture more than five miles from home. The punishment for transgression was exile under the risk of death penalty (Sala 2010: 240). Hughes (1956) affirmed that the life of a Catholic at the time was always insecure. At any moment they could lose everything and risk death. Moreover, Catholics could not trust anybody (Hughes 1956: 369–70). John Carey (1981: 16) adds that Catholics under Elizabeth’s reign were subject to intimidation and blackmail, had no protection under the law, and risked being denounced. Yet, in the face of relentless persecution, the Catholic community survived, albeit in secret. Several recusant houses, which escaped destruction or expropriation, became centers of evangelization in which Catholic Mass was celebrated. Sometimes Catholics were isolated recusants, but more frequently, they were organized in secret networks (Sala 2010: 253).

The role of female figures in this context was particularly relevant. Women were treated as inferior beings in the early modern period, and they were deprived of political and patrimonial rights. Women were less persecuted than men, and consequently could be more active in the defense of the faith (Sala 2010: 254). As Hogge (2006) observes, men represented the public sphere, whereas women represented the private sphere. As a result, women had encountered priests and missionaries more frequently than men, and secretly sheltered them in their houses. This division between male public roles and the more private role played by women thus became a strategy via which English Catholics were able, albeit secretly, to survive (Hogge 2006: 202). As Claire Walker (2003) notes:

women were particularly prominent in recusancy [...]. Principally noted for their orchestration of household religion, [...] gentlewomen also proselytised, administered the affairs of the Catholic clergy, and in public and private defiantly flouted both the established Protestant Church and the state which demanded conformity to it. (11)

In *Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in Early Modern English Texts*, Arthur E. Marotti (1999) underlined how the “recusant Catholic woman was an important character in the religious and cultural drama of early modern England for a number of reasons” (3). First, she was “a figure of resistance to state authority” and a “sign of persistence of the ‘old religion’” in newly-born Protestant England (3). Interestingly, Marotti argued that the recusant woman, like the Catholic religion itself, became the target of “Protestant misogyny” (4): “Woman and Catholicism were both feared as intrinsically idolatrous, superstitious and carnal, if not also physically disgusting” (4). Marotti goes on to assert that the “recusant Catholic woman was ‘unruly’ in her disobedience to the state’s authority, and, possibly, to her husband’s as well” (5) and “in refusing to attend Protestant services, she asserted her personal individual religious autonomy” (Marotti 1999: 5).

Marotti (1999) notes that the first woman to be executed under the recusancy laws of Queen Elizabeth I was Margaret Clitherow, a butcher's wife from York. She was pressed to death in 1586. She had converted to Catholicism after marrying a Protestant man and was imprisoned several times for her recusancy (5). "She not only assisted imprisoned Catholics but also harbored priests, arranged for Catholic instruction for her children and provided Mass for her family and friends" (5). "In one sense, Marotti wrote, "this wife of a Protestant husband [...], and independent-minded woman who changes her religion, [...] is committing a kind of spiritual adultery in meeting her priest in a secluded place away from home" (7). Her final confessor and spiritual advisor, John Mush, wrote her biography, which started to circulate in manuscript form within the Catholic community (5). Many other recusant women in early modern England lost their lives or suffered for their faith. Others were renowned for harboring priests and Jesuits during the persecutions. Notable women in this regard are "Anne Line, Jane Wiseman, Anne Vaux, the Countess of Arundel (whose husband St. Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, died in the Tower), Magdalen Lady Montague, Mary Ward, Gertrude More and Elizabeth Cary" (9). As Marotti argued, recusant Catholic women were figures of resistance to the authority of the state—persistent signs of that old religious tradition within the new Protestant state (Marotti 1999: 3).

Interestingly, Marotti (1999) notes that the first four Stuart kings had Catholic wives, who as a result represented a threat to the state (3): "the Catholic convert, Anne of Denmark, the French princess Henrietta Maria, Catherine of Braganza and Mary of Modena, all were objects of anti-Catholic rhetoric and paranoia" (3). Marotti affirmed that "the imagined danger [...] Catholic women posed to monarchs lay behind a Parliamentary Act of 1689 that made it illegal for an English monarch not only to be a Catholic, but also to be married to a Catholic spouse" (Marotti 1999: 34).

Among prominent Catholic female figures in positions of authority, Mary Stuart (Mary Queen of Scots) certainly deserves a mention. The daughter of James V and the French Mary of Guise, Mary Stuart was Elizabeth I's cousin. She was born in 1542 in Scotland and was raised a Catholic. While the Protestants fought to control Scotland, Mary was sent to Catholic France to be educated. At fifteen she married the heir to the French throne, Francis II, however, Francis died aged only eighteen. In 1561 Mary returned to Scotland, which was then controlled by the Protestants and where her stepbrother James Stuart ruled. By birth, Mary had a strong claim to the throne of England, and she therefore represented a serious threat to Elizabeth's power. The situation worsened when Mary refused to marry Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, who had been suggested to her by Elizabeth herself, and instead married Henry Darnley, her first cousin and a Catholic leader. In 1566, Mary Stuart and Henry Darnley had a son, James, and the possibility that the English throne would then pass to a Catholic became more certain. However, when only a year later in 1567, Henry Darnley died, Mary

was forced to refuse the throne of Scotland in favor of her son, James, and a year later she sought refuge in England, where she was imprisoned for nineteen years until she was eventually executed in 1587 after being accused of involvement in a plot to murder Queen Elizabeth (Sala 2010).

By a strange coincidence, when Queen Elizabeth died on 24 March 1603, the throne of England passed to Mary's son, James, who subsequently prosecuted Elizabeth's anti-Catholic policy (Sala 2010: 289). In 1605, he publicly burned the so-called "Papist" books at the stake and on 5 November the well-known "Gunpowder plot" was uncovered. The latter was a failed attempt to murder the king by a group of English Catholics who were later brutally tortured and killed. In 1606 James issued the Popish Recusants Act, which prohibited Catholics taking up careers in the legal and medical professions, authorized magistrates to search their houses, and raised the recusancy fine to sixty pounds a year, together with the requisition of two thirds of their property. In addition, in 1610 all people of letters were forced to side with the Anglican Church (Sala 2010: 289) and in 1611, James ordered a new translation of the Bible, which has been considered today by the critics one of the masterpieces of English literature.

In 1625, James I died. He was succeeded by Charles I, who was married to the Catholic Bourbon Princess Henrietta Maria of France. The king's quarrels with parliament led to the Civil War in 1642 and to the Republican *Interregnum* of Oliver Cromwell (1649–1660), until the monarchy was finally restored in 1660 and the Stuart King Charles II returned from exile (his wife was again a Catholic, Catherine of Braganza).<sup>22</sup> In 1685, Charles II died and was succeeded by James II, a Catholic. Three years later he bore a child, James Edward, but the Stuarts were again forced into exile and the throne was offered to the Flemish and Protestant William of Orange, who had married one of James II's daughters. This transition was known as the "Glorious Revolution", because in contrast to the previous one, it was bloodless. Two so-called "Jacobite risings", one in 1715 and the other in 1745, attempted to restore the Stuart kings, however, both failed, thus securing a Protestant line to the throne (Sala 2010).

Such a dense period of pivotal events in English history, as represented by the seventeenth century, brought no improvements for Catholics. In 1673, the Test Act prevented them from assuming any public roles and imposed strict Anglicanism upon the whole country. Even the Act of Toleration of 1689, which came into force after the Glorious Revolution, excluded Catholics from any right to the throne. Finally, the Act of Settlement in 1701 (which remains in use to this day) ensured Catholics were denied access to the English throne. The situation for Catholics only began to undergo significant change in 1792, with the Catholic Relief Act and the public opening of the first Catholic

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<sup>22</sup> To deepen how Catholics were treated during the war and under the republican regimes, and the different ways in which they struggled to define their loyalty as English subjects while remaining steadfast to their faith, see Gregory (2021).

non-clandestine church. Another crucial date in the history of Catholic emancipation was 1829, when their persecution officially finished, although discrimination continued until 1871. That year Catholics were finally released from any penal and discriminatory law (although, as stated above, they could no longer aspire to the throne; Sala 2010: 214–16). As Brad S. Gregory observes:

Once both post-Jacobite Catholic laity and clergy had accepted the conditions that compelled their self-redefinition, and the English state had accepted them as a politically obedient religious minority in some respect analogous to Protestant nonconformists, we can speak of the end of early modern and the beginning of modern English Catholicism—a transition that occurred around the time the seminary at Douai was suppressed in France (1793). (cited in J. E. Kelly and Royal 2017: 18)

### **3.3 English Catholics and Mobility**

As Lux-Sterritt (2017) argued, “the history of Early-modern English Catholicism is also a history of exile” (428). In the sixteenth- and seventeenth century, many Catholics decided to leave England, crossing the Channel to seek refuge from persecution and to found new religious houses in Europe. English Catholic networks at the time were particularly dense in the Southern Netherlands and in Northern France. Cities in which they initially found asylum include Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Douai, and Louvain, as well as Paris and Rouen. It was estimated that between 3000 and 5000 English Catholics went into exile from 1598 to 1642 and many more joined them later, even though emigrating or sending children away for education became increasingly difficult as the English government soon acknowledged these activities and tried to stop them through different penal laws. For example, in 1571, Queen Elizabeth I ordered that those who left England for the Continent must return within six months, or forfeit all their goods and profits to the crown. Moreover, transferring money or sending children to the Continent was strictly monitored and regulated. In 1603, King James I strengthened the Elizabethan legislation against religious exile by further increasing the penalties for doing so (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 428–43).

In her recent book entitled *Confessional Mobility and English Catholics in Counter-Reformation Europe*, Liesbeth Corens (2019) groups English Catholic exiles into different categories according to the reasons that underpinned their mission on the Continent. For this study, I will focus on women religious. Twenty-two houses for women religious were established on the Continent between the end of the sixteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century. Their number varied according to the establishment of daughter foundations and the transferring or merging of convents (Corens 2019: 4). It was also estimated that over a period of two hundred years (spanning the

seventeenth and the eighteenth century), known as the “*longue durée*” of English Catholics in exile (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 557), about 4000 women entered these institutions, and the majority of them were English (Kelly 2020: 1).<sup>23</sup>

The first house for women religious to be founded in exile was the Benedictine Monastery of the Glorious Assumption founded in Brussels in 1598. Three Augustinian houses subsequently followed: St Monica’s (also in Brussels) in 1609; the Convent of Nazareth in Bruges (1629); and the Convent of Our Lady of Sion in Paris (1634). Around the same time, a Poor Clare convent was started at Gravelines, known as the Convent of Nazareth, with several offshoot communities following in Aire (1629), Rouen (1644), and Dunkirk (1652). In 1619, the first English Carmelite convent of St. Joseph and St. Anne was opened in Antwerp, followed by two subsequent foundations at Lierre and Hoogstraten, in 1648 and 1678, respectively. Also due to disagreements at the original Brussels convent, several other Benedictine communities were founded in Ghent (1624), Boulogne (1652; subsequently relocated to Pontoise in 1658), Dunkirk (1662), and Ypres (1665). The convent of “Our Lady of Consolation” founded in Cambrai in 1623 was the only Benedictine monastery in exile under the direct authority of the English Benedictine Congregation; its daughter house “Our Blessed Lady of Good Hope” opened in Paris in 1651. Aside religious orders that had multiple convents, there were a series of one-off foundations. The first such foundation was the Franciscan convent, which opened in Brussels in 1621, followed by one in Paris in 1658. There followed the Canonesses Regular of the Holy Sepulchre in Liège in 1642, a Dominican community founded at Vilvorde in 1661, and finally, the Bridgettine Syon Abbey, which ended its peregrinations in 1594 in Lisbon (Kelly 2020: 1–5).

This dissertation investigates the spirituality of the English Benedictine convent of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai. In the following section I present some background information about seventeenth-century English Benedictine houses in exile—their community life and spirituality—before introducing the Cambrai monastery itself in the final section of the chapter.

The word “monastery” is used here “for enclosed nuns who live a strictly cloistered life, take solemn vows and carry out no external, apostolic work” (Jacob 2022: 31). The terms “monastery” or “house” will be used as indistinct from the “convents”, although the latter term meant houses of apostolic sisters who took simple vows, and which were to develop in the nineteenth century (Jacob 2022: 31).

It is worth mentioning here that Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob, who was a professed English Benedictine nun for nearly twenty years before leaving the community, was awarded her Doctorate in 2022 at Durham University with a dissertation entitled “From Exile to Exile? Repatriation, Resettlement and the Contemplative Experience of English Benedictine Nuns in England 1795–

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<sup>23</sup> See Bowden and Kelly (2013).

1887". Interestingly, she examined the period following the one upon which I focus in this research, and her study could therefore be placed in continuity with this one. In her dissertation, Jacob (2022) explains that the Benedictine Order was a pillar of "the spiritual, social, cultural, educational, economic and political infrastructure of pre-Reformation England" (21) and after the dissolution of the monasteries, the English Benedictine Congregation (EBC), which claimed continuity with its thirteenth-century counterpart, was re-aggregated and monasteries for monks were established on the Continent at Douai (1606), Dieulouard (1607), St. Malo (1611), and Paris (1615; Jacob 2022: 21). The function of monks was mainly missionary, and meant for the re-conversion of England. The nuns also had a missionary role, although theirs was not an active one, but rather "pursued within the enclosure through prayer for the reconversion of England and the preservation of English women's religious life" (Jacob 2022: 21). Their life was contemplative and centered around the prayer of the Divine Office, which was celebrated communally through the prayer of the "Hours" and Mass, and silent personal contemplative prayer. Moreover, the Benedictines placed a great emphasis on study, and the composition and copying of texts, which also served the purpose to preserve the English Catholic spiritual tradition (Jacob 2022: 23)—the so-called "apostolate of the pen".<sup>24</sup>

### **3.4 English Benedictine Convents in Exile in the Seventeenth Century**

All Benedictine convents in exile had to follow the Rule of St. Benedict and the Statutes or Constitutions of the house that supplemented it (Goodrich 2021: 12). The latter prescribed to the nuns "stability"—in other words, enclosure, the "conversion of manners", and "obedience" to superiors (Goodrich 2021: 29).

According to early modern standards, women were more sensual and more emotive than men, and thus their emotional weakness had to be mitigated, if not tamed (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 231). The Catholic reformation reflected these gendered prejudices and enforced strict rules for women religious, who could no longer choose an eremitic life or an independent life in the world as consecrated virgins. On the contrary, after the Council of Trent (1545–1563), women had to be affiliated to an enclosed convent and to be surveyed by men. All such convents were placed under an external male authority, be that the local bishop or the superior of the congregation to which the monastery belonged (Jacob 2022: 30). Differently from males religious, who could venture on missions in England and on the Continent for the recovery of the Catholic faith, nuns were not permitted to interact with the outside world, following the decrees of the Council of Trent and Pope

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<sup>24</sup> See Jaime Goodrich's *Translating Lady Mary Percy: Authorship and Authority Among the Brussels Benedictines* and Jenna Lay's *The Literary Lives of the Nuns: Crafting Identity through Exile*, as published in Bowden and Kelly (2013: 109–22 and 71–86).



Pius V's 1566 "Constitution Circa Pastoralis". The separation from the world that seventeenth-century Benedictine nuns had to observe was even more rigorous than for their medieval predecessors: no nun was allowed to leave the convent and no one from outside could enter, except in very rare situations. Tridentine requirements and the precepts of Carlo Borromeo's 1599 "Instructions on Ecclesiastical Buildings" also prescribed a monastery architecture that ensured complete physical separation from the outside world, with high walls built around the houses and the gardens, and only two gates (one for deliveries, and one for visitors), which were opened as infrequently as possible (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 933–34). Moreover, the passing of small items happened through "turns", which were "swelling devices which permitted the exchange of goods without any contact between the people involved" (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 231). The English monk and mystic Father Augustine Baker, who was sent to the monastery of Cambrai in 1624 to provide guidance and input in contemplation, said to his friend, the antiquarian Sir Robert Cotton: "they are never seen by us, nor by any other, unless it be rarely upon an extraordinary occasion" (Truran 1997: 159). "In contrast, the monks could be moved from monastery to monastery or sent on the mission at the President's word" (Truran 1997: 159). For a woman, entering the monastery hence meant renouncing the world in order to become an empty vessel to be filled with God's presence. "The goal was to crucify the flesh through abnegation and a 'mortification of the senses'" (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 235). The new names given to women in religion that substituted the ones given at birth "symbolized the death of their secular beings and the birth of a new religious identity inspired by the holiness of the saint whose name was adopted" (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 234).

The monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience were other weapons the nuns could use in their battle against sin and secular affectivity, which were considered incompatible with the godly vocation (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 235–36). Possession of any personal property was forbidden, as nuns had to free both their souls and minds from worldly attachments (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 233). Moreover, life was strictly regulated through a fixed and precise *horarium* meant to create order, both in the community and inside one's soul in order to facilitate prayer and meditation (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 1076–1171). As far as the Benedictines are concerned, it must be said that excesses of discipline and humiliation were discouraged, as they were considered ostentatious (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 236). Therefore, every regulation was not an end in itself, meant to humiliate or mortify the monk or nun. Rather, it was a means to free his/her body and spirit from inordinate worldly affections, so that he/she could enjoy a perfect union with God in prayer, contemplation, manual labor, and community life, as prescribed in the Rule.

The Rule also prescribed obedience to superiors. Abbesses or prioresses exercised a leading role inside the communities, which could be compared to a "spiritual family", wherein each member

had a precise role or position: “the abbess the mother, the nuns her daughters, and they were all sisters to each other” (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 1493). However, these women were strictly supervised and controlled by male clerical authorities. Male spiritual directors guided their spiritual life and each convent was overseen by male ecclesiastical authorities. Thus, the patriarchal system and the gendered hierarchy of the early modern society were reflected inside the convent’s walls (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 1545). Spiritual directors and confessors often lived in buildings located near the convent and interacted frequently with the nuns, usually weekly, but sometimes also daily. The official house confessors “said the majority of masses, heard confessions, administered the eucharist, and guided nuns in positions of authority” (Van Hyning 2013: 146). Nuns were discouraged from approaching spiritual exercises without male supervision “since, despite their good intentions, the outcome was likely to be blighted by their flawed nature” (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 237).

Hence, clerical guidance was perceived as crucial to the spiritual progress of women religious (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 237). Jesuit direction in particular “was in great demand in continental convents in post-Trent Spanish Netherlands and Frances” (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 237). Jesuit missionaries were often responsible for recruiting potential postulants among the English gentry for the founding of religious houses on the Continent and, to that end, expanded their sphere of spiritual influence (Van Hyning 2013: 150). For example, Jesuit missionaries played a significant role in the foundation of the first English Benedictine convent in exile: the “Monastery of the Glorious Assumption”, which opened in 1598 in Brussels (Kelly 2020: 24). Many nuns had already experienced Jesuit spiritual direction at home in recusant circles and among the Benedictines, several sisters had Jesuits in their families. It is therefore unsurprising that they relied on their spiritual advice.

However, Jesuit direction did not suit all nuns, as is revealed in the manner in which Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* progressively evolved from its initial flexibility to a more rigid set of meditations that excluded mystical forms of spirituality. The Brussels house, for example, ended up into two factions, one following Jesuit direction and one rejecting it. At “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai, the community also rejected Jesuit direction, as it was not considered suitable to the Benedictine contemplative ideal. These episodes reveal how, despite close male supervision, nuns often managed to achieve self-determination in spiritual matters, and also believed that the wrong guidance would hinder their spiritual progress (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 237).

Another important element of English Benedictines was that, like all other English orders, they were forced to live in exile. In his recent publication, *English Convents in Catholic Europe c. 1600–1800*, the historian of Catholicism James E. Kelly (2020) argues that it was the Catholic faith, more than their national belonging, that lay at the heart of the exiled English nuns’ endeavors in the early modern period. In other words, the nuns felt part of a “global transnational Catholic Church”

(14) and their nationality—namely, their Englishness—was little more than a “colouring to their primary religious identity” (Kelly 2020: 18).

It seems worth spending a few moments here on English early modern Catholicism and its relationship with Continental Catholicism.<sup>25</sup> According to Brad S. Gregory (2017), early modern English Catholicism was inseparable from Catholicism on the European Continent in at least five ways (24): First, the Continent was the adoptive home for English Catholic refugees (24). Second, the latter depended on priests who were instructed and ordained there (25). Third, they also depended heavily on Continental printers for the dissemination of their literary work (25–26). Fourth, English Catholics found support in the political powers of Spain and France, and thus “English Catholicism remained politically a part of international Catholicism and thus intimately connected to major developments in early modern European politics” (26). Finally, Gregory argues that English Catholicism remained part of Roman Catholicism, and early modern Catholics in England “looked specifically to the papacy for authoritative teaching as well as ecclesiastical appointments and the settling of disputes before and after the Council of Trent” (26). Continuing, he suggests that

if we removed from early modern English Catholicism the papacy and Rome, interactions with European Catholic regimes, the publication of works by, for and about English Catholics, the training and ordination of secular and regular clergy, and the importance of especially the Low Countries and northern France as adoptive homes for English Catholics in exile, Catholicism in England itself from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries would be unrecognisable. English Catholicism was more than Catholicism in England. Despite political constraints and the penal laws, early modern English Catholicism was never insular, in either sense of the word. (27)

In this context, Gregory believes that English Benedictines felt part of the broader English mission to restore Catholicism in their homeland and every activity was aimed towards achieving this goal (Gregory 2017: 18).

Dr. Scholastica Susan Jacob (2022) also contended that “exile was undertaken through their own agency—despite the dangers it involved—with the motivation of personal vocation and contribution to the survival of English Catholicism and the perpetuation of religious life for English women” (4). Jacob further asserts:

The *raison d'être* of the English convents on the Continent had been to advance God's work by returning England to the true faith. This was not a passive mission; the nuns proactively

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<sup>25</sup> See Gregory (2017).

engaged with their English Catholicism in a process which was “actively creating an identity for the time when Catholicism was returned to their homeland”. (Jacob 2022: 8)

James Kelly (2020) argued that although nuns had to flee from their homeland and establish themselves on the Continent, the English nuns failed to form “an archipelagic Catholic identity” (19–20). This was in part due to the fact that English houses on the Continent were made up almost exclusively of English women, thus mirroring recusant circles at home and representing the most important Catholic families, some of which also had a very strong influence over certain religious houses (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 1399–1413).

The ways in which nuns contributed to the mission of Catholic recovery in their homeland were varied. First, they provided a model of life for young Catholic women, who could now aspire to a contemplative life in an English cloister—a possibility they no longer had at home. Second, they had frequent contacts with missionaries and with their friends and relatives, to whom they mainly provided advice in matters of spirituality (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 2768). Moreover, nuns had access to a wide variety of texts in the convent libraries and they performed numerous literary activities that enabled the Catholic heritage to survive. On the one hand, they translated, copied, and collected medieval, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century spiritual and mystical writings of the Catholic tradition, which could otherwise have been lost. One could say these activities were part of what Alexandra Walsham (2011: 4) has called “the energetic attempts of the Roman Catholic faith to resist annihilation by the Tudor and Stuart state” (cited in J. E. Kelly and Royal 2017: 29). On the other hand, as Dorothy Latz (1997) demonstrated, they were prolific writers of poetry, biographies, autobiographies, letters, essays, devotions, and miscellaneous prose. Through such writings, nuns gave glimpses into their personal thoughts, feelings, and their prayers, as well as revealing how they experienced their relationship to male orders and authorities, and how they practically lived in their own communities, dealing with everyday problems, such as money issues and physical work.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Lux-Sterritt (2017: 3065) revealed that aside from prayer, nuns had to attend to many other more “mundane” activities to ensure their financial safety and economic stability. Moreover, studies such as those by Caroline Bowden (1999) and Claire Walker (2000, 2003, 2004) reveal the active political role played by the nuns, for example in support of the Stuart cause (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 2510–37).<sup>27</sup> The writings of English Benedictines thus reveal a much richer and multifaceted reality than

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<sup>26</sup> See Dolan (2007).

<sup>27</sup> The Stuart cause, also known as “Jacobitism”, “was a series of political movements which supported the restoration of the exiled house of Stuart after James II had been ousted from the throne at the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and had fled to France. Jacobites continued to support the claims to the throne of James's son James Francis Edward Stuart (the Old Pretender or ‘James III’) and his two grandsons Charles Edward Stuart (the Young Pretender or ‘Charles III’) and Henry Stuart (the cardinal duke of York or ‘Henry IX’)”. Jacobitism had both a religious and a political dimension: James II and his descendants were Catholics and they refused to convert to Protestantism. Therefore, their restoration to the throne was

the stereotyped one found in English anti-Catholic pamphlets or in French anticlerical literature, which questioned their virtuousness and diligence (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 504).

It must also be said that, unlike other Continental nunneries in Spain, France, and Italy, forced vocations were rare in English convents (if more so among English Benedictines). Additionally, the rate of withdrawal on the part of the nuns, which was estimated around three per cent, was also low. This might be due to the particular circumstances of Catholicism in England: they were a minority under penal laws, so missionaries often encouraged women to stay at home, where they could help organize networks of support, considering the fact that they were less likely to be prosecuted than their male counterparts, and they could thus transmit Catholic values to their children (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 1763–78). Moving to the Continent was also a perilous journey and risky from a financial perspective, as sending women with no vocation abroad was problematic since Catholic families, even the wealthiest, were under the heavy toll of penalties and marriage dowries had diminished due to the fact that Catholics tended to intermarry instead of forming alliances with Protestants (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 1763). In this respect, English convents in exile distanced themselves from their Continental counterparts, where forced vocations were more frequent. Another difference pertained to the issue of entrants' dowries. The latter were in fact much more affordable for English women than in French, Italian, Spanish, or Portuguese cloisters and they did not play such an important role in promotion either.<sup>28</sup> This further discouraged the phenomenon of forced vocations (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 1793). Apart from dowries, English communities in exile had limited means of raising money, as they were limited by the prescriptions of enclosure. One means open to them was the accommodating and the education of scholars or boarders. Benefactors also played a crucial role in assuring financial support and in return they were granted a recognized status as founders and benefitted from the nuns' prayers. Therefore, despite enclosure, female religious interacted frequently with the outside world and male presence and support were essential, starting from the foundation, to spiritual direction and patronage (Lux-Sterritt 2017: 2084–2392).

The final section presents the monastery of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai and the role of male spiritual direction there.

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only possible by an armed invasion. However, most of their supporters were protestants, and a great many had refused to pledge allegiance to King William and his wife Mary. Therefore, they lost their secular or religious offices. Scotland was the place where Jacobitism was strongest, and it also became a refuge for those who opposed the Union with England in 1707. From: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100015829> [last accessed: 18 July 2022].

<sup>28</sup> See Kelly (2012).

### 3.5 The Monastery of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai

The convent of “Our Lady of Consolation” (now Stanbrook Abbey, Wass) was founded in Cambrai in 1623 by two Benedictine monks: Dom Rudesind Barlow, President General of the English Congregation (1621–1629), and Dom Benedict Jones, Superior of the London District of the Order. It was the only one of the seven Benedictine convents in exile to be established under the authority of the English Benedictine Congregation. Barlow and Jones had gathered nine young English women,<sup>29</sup> among them St Thomas More’s great-great-granddaughter, Helen (religious name Gertrude), alongside two of her cousins, Grace and Ann,<sup>30</sup> to create a new monastery in exile as the Dissolution prevented English Catholics from founding religious houses at home (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location n. 209–20). As Goodrich (2021) argues, the Benedictine vows of conversion of manners, obedience, and stability located each nun “within local, national, and international communities of spirit: first, the Cambrai convent; second, the English Benedictine Congregation (which held jurisdiction over the Cambrai convent); and third, the Benedictine order at large” (29). As with all Benedictine monasteries, Cambrai observed “a similar pattern punctuated by communal activities (offices, chapter, work, meals) and individual activities (meditation, prayer, reading)” (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location n. 1181). The nuns observed two half-hour sessions of mental prayer each day, one in the morning and one in the evening. Moreover, they had to attend Mass and recite the Divine Office six times a day with the whole community.

The liturgy was in fact the main pillar of monastic life. Despite the initial Ignatian orientation of the house under the guidance of three Brussels nuns, the nuns did not believe the latter to be fit for an enclosed and contemplative order with no active apostolate and they requested further guidance in contemplative prayer (Van Hyning 2013: 159). The President of the newly revived English Benedictine Congregation sent Father Augustine Baker, who stayed there for nine years, from 1624 to 1633. He had a deep influence on the nuns’ spirituality. As we will see in subsequent chapters, he laid the foundation of a spiritual tradition that continues to this day. Baker believed the Ignatian methods were not appropriate for the nuns, and he suggested more personalized affective prayer types, which were intended to lead to a state of passive contemplation of God, in which the senses, imagination, and the will were suspended. In 1651, Cambrai founded an offshoot at Paris, which also practiced Baker’s methods (Goodrich 2021: 10). A separate tradition of English Benedictine spirituality thus developed at the Cambrai and Paris houses (Goodrich 2021: 10). These contemplative

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<sup>29</sup> Helen More (Dame Gertrude); Margaret Vavasour; Anne Morgan; Catherine Gascoigne; Grace and Ann More, cousins of Helen; Frances Watson; and two lay sisters, Mary Hoskins and Jane Martin.

<sup>30</sup> In 1629, Helen’s younger sister, Bridget, also arrived in Cambrai.

practices were used by the nuns until the eighteenth century and, as we will see in the final chapter, are still one of the main pillars of monastic life at Stanbrook today (Goodrich 2021: 71).

In 1629, the English Benedictine Congregation's Chapter decided that the community of Cambrai was to be governed by one of their own members (initially, they had been helped by a number of Brussels nuns). The choice fell on Dame Catherine Gascoigne (1600–1676), who was elected second abbess and re-elected every four years until her resignation in 1673.<sup>31</sup> The English Benedictine Congregation also requested that Cambrai produced its own Statutes, which were compiled by Rudesind Barlow and Leander à Sancto Martino. They based the Cambrai Constitutions on that of Brussels: both were structured into three parts—the first devoted to piety, the second to governance, and the third to temporal matters (Goodrich 2021: 37). All Statutes ensured observance of the Benedictine Rule, yet they presented some variations due to the founders' understanding of communal life. The Paris and Cambrai houses, for example, focused their spirituality on contemplative prayer, thus eliminating references to rote prayer (Goodrich 2021: 38). Margaret Truran observed that “Augustine Baker may have written the preface and a few other passages in the Cambrai Constitutions that set forth a contemplative ideal of monastic life” (cited in Goodrich 2021: 36).

Given the influence of Baker on the spiritual course at Cambrai, in the next chapter I will examine this figure in further detail: both his life and his spirituality will be discussed, as well as his relationship with the Cambrai nuns. Drawing from renowned historians of women religious, such as Victoria van Hyning (2012) and Jaime Goodrich (2021), I will contend that Baker's doctrines strongly influenced both the spirituality and the agentic capacity of the nuns who followed him.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.stanbrookabbey.org.uk/site.php?id=20> [last accessed: 6 April 2022].

## 4 Father Augustine Baker's Spirituality and His Relationship with the Cambrai Nuns<sup>32</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

As argued by Victoria Van Hyning (2013), the frequent contacts between official house confessors and the nuns in English Benedictine monasteries, alongside the fact that these men acted as mediators between God and the nuns as they administered the Sacraments, “made the confessor-confessee relationship one of the most powerful forces in a nun’s life” (146). However, this was a two-way relationship: the confessors provided sermons, advice, and manuals for the nuns, while the latter were their primary audience and shaped their spiritual interests (Van Hyning 2013: 146). For example, confessors sometimes “adapted their instruction to fit the individual spiritual needs of a nun if hers differed significantly from those of other nuns in the community” (Van Hyning 2013: 147). Such flexibility could also generate controversies around orthodoxy, which required the intervention of the order’s General Chapter. This is precisely what happened at the Benedictine monastery of Cambrai: Fr Augustine Baker’s treatises and the devotional practices of some nuns who followed his direction resulted in a formal examination of his doctrines and the nature of his teachings (Van Hyning 2013: 147).

This chapter examines Baker’s spirituality and his relationship with the Cambrai nuns. The first part of the chapter offers a detailed profile of Baker’s life and teachings, while the second part examines the controversy over Baker’s spiritual course and the role played by the Cambrai nuns—particularly that of the then abbess Catherine Gascoigne, but also those of Gertrude More and Barbara Constable.<sup>33</sup>

### 4.2 Augustine Baker: Life and Spirituality

David Baker, religious name Dom Augustine, was a seventeenth-century English Benedictine monk, best known for his writings on mystical spiritual contemplation, which earned him a place in “The English Mystical Tradition” (Knowles 1959).<sup>34</sup> As underlined, among others by Temple (2019) and Kelly (2020), Baker gained a reputation of “sanctity”, mainly thanks to Serenus Cressy’s digest of his original works—“Sancta Sophia” or “Holy Wisdom”—published in 1657, which has long been the main source of information regarding his teachings. However, Temple (2019) and Kelly (2020)

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<sup>32</sup> Author’s note: when possible, the quotations in this paper keep the original early modern English spelling. Translations into modern English have been provided in square brackets next to each word only when the original spelling could impede the understanding.

<sup>33</sup> On this issue, see also Goodrich (2021) and Van Hyning (2012).

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed account of David’s Baker’s life and religious experience, see Baker (2002) and Salvin, Cressy, and McCann (1997).



revealed how Sancta Sophia misled scholars regarding the true interpretation of Baker's doctrines and hid the controversial nature of his ideas.<sup>35</sup> The influence and popularity of Baker increased after his death and he became a real "cultus" (Lunn 1975: 269). Baker became known as "Venerable", as this was the title that appeared on the title page of Sancta Sophia. Both Leander Prichard (a friend of Baker) and his confessor Peter Salvin wrote about his life, but they were published only in the twentieth century (Lunn 1975: 269).

Baker was born in Abergavenny, Wales, in 1575. He was the thirteenth and youngest child of William Baker, receiver-general and recorder of the borough of Abergavenny, and Maud Lewis, the daughter of a local minister (Kelly 2020: 3). Abergavenny was known for its strong Catholic presence, but his parents conformed to the Church of England under the compulsion of the state, albeit remaining devout Catholics in their hearts (Baker 2002: xvi). After two years at Oxford, where Baker failed to take a degree and instead fell into rather dissolute company, he moved to London where he trained as a lawyer for several years—an endeavor that proved more successful. However, in 1598 his father called him home to be recorder of his borough, after the death of Baker's brother, Richard, who had previously overseen that office (Kelly 2020: 3). It was during this period that Baker, an atheist since the age of sixteen (Baker 2002: xvii), suddenly experienced a religious conversion to Catholicism.

It was 1600 when Baker, now twenty-five, experienced a "miraculous incident" (Temple 2019: 215). He was riding his horse on a narrow bridge over the river Monnow, but he suddenly realized that he was stranded and risked drowning. When he realized death was near, Baker promised God he would devote his life to him if he survived. Suddenly, his horse turned and carried him to a safe area (Temple 2019: 215). Baker then started to read Catholic devotional texts, "such as classic mystic texts by St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila".<sup>36</sup> He was reconciled to the Roman Catholic church by Father Richard Floyd in May 1603 and was determined to be a monk. At that time, those aspiring to be monks were sent to either Italy or Spain to receive religious training, after which they would return to England to pursue missionary activities (Baker 2002: xvii). Baker studied at St Justina's in Padua, Italy, and took the Benedictine habit in January 1605 (Van Hyning 2013: 147). However, during this experience of "first fervour" (Baker 2002: xvii), Baker's health began to fail, and he experienced difficulties practicing the Ignatian prayer methods proposed there (Kelly 2020: 3). This led him to a state of desolation and aridity.

Baker returned to England in 1607, assisted his now dying father, and served as a missionary from 1613 to 1624 (Temple 2019: 215). Following the death of his father, Baker went to London and

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<sup>35</sup> See also Lunn (1975).

<sup>36</sup> Plante, Kelly, "Baker and his Mysticism." In *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. Eds. Jaime Goodrich and Kelly Plante. <[s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/](http://s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/)>. Date accessed: [14 July 2021].

joined the Benedictines of the Cassinese Congregation. It was there, thanks to his legal knowledge, that he was able to help restore the old English Benedictine Congregation and helped its reconciliation with Rome (Baker 2002: xviii).<sup>37</sup> In 1608, Baker attempted a life of prayer and retirement at Sir Nicholas Fortescue's house at Cook Hill in Worcestershire where, it was claimed, he experienced passive contemplation. This was considered his second attempt at pursuing internal prayer. Baker never gave a detailed description of his mystical experience, simply describing it as “a speaking of God in his soul” (Baker 2002: xix). At Cook Hill he also read extensively in the mystical tradition of Spain, the Rhineland, and fourteenth-century England. For the subsequent twelve years or so he experienced a long period of desolation and, as a result, abandoned contemplative prayer, filling his time by conducting external activities. It is likely that his ordination at Rheims in 1613 (for which he seems to have received no theological training) was motivated by his desire to improve his spiritual life (Baker 2002: xx).

His third attempt to practice internal prayer happened around 1620, thanks to the reading of “*Speculum Christianae Perfectionis*” by Johannes Lanspergius, a Carthusian of the Cologne Charterhouse (1489–1539; Baker 2002: xx). Baker, understanding his previous spiritual mistakes, tried to devote himself once more to contemplation. He looked for a place of retirement and was given the position of domestic chaplain at the house of Philip Fursden in Devonshire. There he resumed his spiritual life and the practice of mental prayer, although he did not experience passive contemplation again, perhaps until the year of his death (Baker 2002: xx). While in Devonshire, his health again deteriorated, and he returned once more to London.

His superiors then gave to him a new task: to collect materials to refute the claim that the English Benedictines had been a dependency of Cluny, founded in 910. The result of his research was “*Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia*” (1626, Douai), a historical overview of the Benedictine order that attempted “to establish its primacy amongst English Catholic monastic traditions” (Van Hynning 2013: 148). To conduct research for this book, Baker spent some time in Sir Robert Cotton’s library. As Van Hynning (2013: 148) notes, his reading of Pre-Reformation texts in Cotton’s library later influenced Baker’s own reading and writing. He read many medieval English texts on meditation and prayer, and various editions and comments on the Benedictine Rule.

In 1624, fearing the renewed persecution of Catholics after the failure of the negotiations for the royal Spanish marriage, Baker moved to the Continent and was appointed assistant chaplain and spiritual guide at the recently founded Benedictine Convent of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai, in the Spanish Netherlands, where he stayed for nine years, from 1624 to 1633 (Van Hynning

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<sup>37</sup> For the history of the English Benedictines revival, see Lunn (1980).

2013: 148).<sup>38</sup> It is important to emphasize that Baker was sent to Cambrai by the President of the English Benedictine Congregation, Father Rudesind Barlow, as “tabler” or lodger, rather than as an official Vicar (Truran 1997: 159). This important fact means that he was not called to Cambrai as a “director” of the nuns and his position was always unofficial. Indeed, Baker lived outside enclosure and had to wait for the nuns to come to him for spiritual instructions, in case they needed them—something, at least initially, in which not all of the nuns participated. As argued below, it was the unofficial nature of Baker’s position at Cambrai that led to a controversy with Dom Francis Hull, the official chaplain of the convent.

One might also ask what qualifications Fr Baker had for the task of the spiritual direction of nuns, as he described himself as “unversed in scholastic theology” (Rodrigues 2002: 134). Prior to his arrival at Cambrai he had never had any previous experience of spiritual direction of nuns, nor did he know the politics of enclosed life. However, as Wekking (2002: xxi) argues, this new appointment must have been congenial to him since it favored his contemplative life and at the same time gave him the opportunity to transmit his ideas and his own personal experience to the nuns who sought his direction (Wekking 2002: xxi). Despite his solitary nature, Baker soon became a “polarizing” figure (Temple 2019: 216) at Cambrai and attracted many women religious who came to hold his spiritual guidance in high esteem, promptly following his advice, despite the fact that “his teaching had yet to prove itself in the long term” (Truran 2001: 74). Baker was also very prolific and wrote many religious treatises that were copied and circulated by the Cambrai sisters among other daughter houses (Walker 2004: 238). Dame Margaret Truran (2001) declared:

Father Baker’s achievement at Cambrai was enormous. He provided for the spiritual needs of the Cambrai nuns a teaching that has endured for almost four hundred years, built up a fine library of contemplative reading material that included his own prolific literary output, drew up reading lists to guide the nuns, and encouraged them to co-operate by translating [...] contemporary works. (78)

Moreover, regarding the years Baker spent at Cambrai, Father Leander Prichard called them “the noblest part of his life and that which hath given deserved fame to all the rest” (cited in Truran 2001: 70).

In the following section, I work to deepen our understanding of Baker’s spirituality and the contemplative path he suggested to the Cambrai nuns who sought his assistance.

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<sup>38</sup> The so-called royal Spanish marriage was a proposed marital union between Prince Charles, the son of King James I of Great Britain, and Infanta Maria Anna of Spain, the daughter of Philip III of Spain.

### 4.3 The “Bakerite”<sup>39</sup> Spiritual Course

Upon his arrival in 1624, Baker did not support the discursive Jesuit “Spiritual Exercises” and its meditational regime, with which the Cambrai nuns were accustomed, but were dissatisfied. He soon realized that such exercises were unsuitable for enclosed nuns living in exile and he also believed that women were not naturally inclined to rational exercises. According to Baker, such an approach would only instill in them a sense of guilt and fear (Truran 2001: 74). He believed that the Jesuit exercises were designed for active religious instead, and reserved insufficient space for affective prayer, which was, according to him, a natural inclination of women (Rodrigues 2002: 141). Therefore, he set an alternative path: an exercise of prayer based on the will and on affection, rather than on understanding and meditation:

beginners in such prayer, he warns, would be unable to spend long hours in it. But they would soon move from forced acts to aspirations flowing from love of God, which they would be able to continue in the midst of whatever they were doing. (Truran 2001: 74)

According to Baker, such an affective type of prayer would give to the nuns “the freedom to follow the intimate call of God” (Rodrigues 2002: 141) and to find the “devotional path which best suited their ability and temperament” (Walker 2004: 240).

Baker stressed the importance of one’s interior call and the primacy of the Holy Spirit in the direction of souls. Moreover, he approached spiritual direction, not as a strict control over spiritual life, but as a general guidance to “spiritual self-sufficiency” (Van Hyning 2013: 144). He contended that observance of the interior call, or divine inspiration, was central to advancement in spiritual life—that this, and only this, would bring peace to the soul and lead it to a state of perfection. In 1629 he completed the treatise “Doubts and Calls”, which holds a central place in his spiritual theology and in which he answered the young novices’ question of how to pray in a three word response: “Observe your call” (Truran 2001: 76). In Baker’s understanding, “the divine call or initiative, is paramount, and the main duty in the spiritual life is to learn to respond to the promptings of grace” (Truran 2001: 76). Interestingly, the Preface of the Paris house Constitutions, approved in 1656 and based on that of Cambrai, said: “To this purpose is that legacy the venerable Father Augustine Baker left you: ‘observe your call, that’s all in all’” (Rowell 2001: 83).<sup>40</sup> Baker considered this his best advice to the

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<sup>39</sup> The adverb “Bakerite” was coined by Bowden and Kelly (2013: 239).

<sup>40</sup> “The Monastery of Our Lady of Good Hope was founded in Paris by the nuns of Cambrai, ten years after the death of Baker. It is now St. Mary’s Abbey, Colwich, near Stafford” (Rowell 2001: 82).

nuns of Cambrai: that they should feel free to ignore external advice and follow their own call (Rodrigues 2002: 153): “Be not harmed or hindred in your way by any thinge that euer I haue said or written [...] but follow on your way, your spirit and your call” (Book D, p. 51, cited in Rodrigues 2002: 153).

Answering those who encouraged dependence on external influences, Baker maintained:

[to] take all your instructions from without,  
from external teachers or books, [...] have nothing at all to do with  
the ways of contemplation [...] it is God only that internally teaches both the teacher and disciple, and His inspirations are the only lesson for both. All our light, therefore, is from divine illumination and all our strength as to these things is from the divine operation of the Holy Ghost on our wills and affections. (Baker, *Holy Wisdom*, 99–100, cited in Higgins 1963: 160)

In this quotation Baker stresses how one’s spiritual way is not external—i.e. stemming from readings or spiritual teachers’ advice—but is internal, meaning it originates in the will and in the affection, and is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Baker believed that God alone was the director of the internal ways of souls, and he believed in “individualized connections with God without confessors as the middlemen, ultimately giving nuns more autonomy in their spiritual lives”.<sup>41</sup> Baker thus discouraged blind obedience to him, or to external directors in general, and promoted the discernment of God’s internal teaching. Hence, the nuns were actively involved in finding their own contemplative ways. As Dame Margaret Truran (1997) wrote, Baker believed that “methods, systems and spiritual directors were a means, not an end. Their purpose was to help an individual reach maturity of discernment and respond to the direct action of the Holy Spirit” (160). Dependence on an intermediary was therefore no longer necessary, once spiritual freedom and openness to God’s guidance had been attained (Truran 1997: 160). Moreover, according to Baker, there was only one way to reach a true internal contemplative life: obedience to what he called “internal divine lights and

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<sup>41</sup> Plante, Kelly. “Religious Politics among the Cambrai Benedictines.” In *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. Eds. Jaime Goodrich and Kelly Plante. <[s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/](http://s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/)>. Date accessed: [14 July 2021].

inspirations or calls” (Truran 1997: 160) or, in other words, “the promptings of grace in the soul” (Truran 1997: 160).

In “Of an External Director”, a chapter of Baker’s *Holy Wisdom*, he distinguished the role of the spiritual director from that of the confessor, which is only to hear the penitent’s faults and to give absolution. In Baker’s understanding, the spiritual director should have a deep experience in spiritual matters and should be able to discern the disciple’s nature and inclinations to provide general guiding principles she could apply by herself. Hence the director’s “necessity is not to last always”, since “God will be the faithful counsellor” and He alone “is our only master and director” (*Holy wisdom*, 1876: 73–86, cited in Leclercq 1987: 60). There now follows Baker’s definition of the spiritual director:

By a spiritual director I intend one  
that [...] is to instruct the disciple  
in all the peculiar duties of an internal life;  
that is, to judge of her propension to con-  
templative ways, and that can at least  
teach her how she may fit herself with  
a degree of prayer proper for her; that knows  
all the degrees of internal prayer [...]; that  
can judge what employments, etc., are helping  
or hindering to her progress in internal ways;  
but especially that can teach her how to  
dispose herself to hearken to and follow God's  
internal teaching, and to stand in no more need  
of consulting her external director. (Baker, *Holy Wisdom*, 75, cited in Higgins 1963: 96)

These ideas might have sounded unique in the context of Post-Trent, which placed so much emphasis on spiritual supervision, especially of women, driven by the fear of heresy. However, by doing so, as Temple (2019: 43) argued, Baker was not establishing some new devotion. To the contrary, he was following a well-established tradition, to be found already in the Catholic patristic teachings of St. Augustine, St. John, and St. Paul (Higgins 1963: 158). This is the so-called “liberty of spirit”, which is “the space to be, to act, to react to the guidance of God” (Rodrigues 2002: 143). Unlike many spiritual directors, he was determined to lead the souls under his care “into a land of freedom, where they are directed by the Spirit alone” (E. Baker 2001: 64). Because none of Baker’s treatises were

published individually, it is hard to know whether he provided his own definition of the “interior call”. He initially gave all his teachings by word alone and only later, as numbers in the convent increased, was he asked to commit them to paper. His first treatise was entitled “A.B.C.” and drew heavily, like all his works, on patristic teachings. Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob argued that “Baker’s whole idea of interior call grew in response to the nuns’ own needs”<sup>42</sup> and she claimed that she was not entirely sure if he ever defined the concept, although others paraphrased it, such as Catherine Gascoigne’s “Consider your call: that’s all in all”.<sup>43</sup>

Sr Maragaret Truran underlined how the concept of interior freedom was also one of the seven qualities required in the processes of personal discernment and decision-making, which were central to Jesuit spirituality.<sup>44</sup> For Jesuits, “the whole and deepest desire [...] to do whatever God's will is [...], with no conditions attached”,<sup>45</sup> is realized in inner freedom. However, as Truran asked: “can one always be sure of having discovered God’s will?”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, considering that obedience to superiors was central and considered sacred in Jesuit religious life, and that it reflected the obedience owed to God, the scrupulous could become overdependent on their superiors or confessors.<sup>47</sup> However, for Fr Baker, understanding and observing God’s interior call was central to the Rule of St Benedict. He believed that seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer led to a habit of discernment that avoided excessive dependence on the superior or the confessor.<sup>48</sup> Obedience to him was still required, but, as Truran affirmed, there was an “interior freedom”<sup>49</sup> and “a certain maturity in the response”.<sup>50</sup> The confessor was someone who heard confessions and offered spiritual guidance, rather than someone who exacted obedience.<sup>51</sup> It therefore becomes clear that Jesuits and Baker held a slightly different interpretation of the concept of inner freedom.

As previously stated, prior to his arrival at Cambrai, Baker had not acquired any previous experience of the spiritual direction of nuns, and thus it is likely that he elaborated his teaching of inner freedom during his stay at Cambrai. He noticed that the novices were having problems with the Ignatian prayer style and meditational regime, which were too rational and directive. He therefore suggested an alternative path “of simple renunciation to the Holy Spirit through aspirations and then

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<sup>42</sup> From: personal correspondence (email) with Dr. Scholastica Susan Jacob, dated 11 July 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> From: personal correspondence (email) with Sr Maragaret Truran, dated 7 October 2022.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/taking-time-to-reflect/inspired-decision-making/1/seven-attitudes-or-qualities-required#:~:text=Interior%20Freedom%3A,follow%20God's%20will%20for%20us.%C3%B9%C3%B9> Date accessed: [6 October 2022]

<sup>46</sup> From: personal correspondence (email) with Sr Maragaret Truran, dated 7 October 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem.

wordless prayer” in answer to their needs.<sup>52</sup> In doing so, Baker was “very much building on his own experience of, and problems with, religious life”.<sup>53</sup> As Jacob affirmed:

he was honing down the essence of prayer—continual prayer—to an inner listening to and following the Holy Spirit. He said that none of his teaching was new but came from the early Fathers and mystics and he recognised that the nuns were receptive to this form of prayerful life in a way that the monks were not.<sup>54</sup>

It seems noteworthy that the liberty of spirit Baker advocated for the enabling of divine inspirations is in continuity with his treatment of scrupulosity (Rodrigues 2002: 136). In “A Secure Stay in All Temptations” (1629), Baker taught the Cambrai nuns not to confess more than was necessary to their spiritual progress, and he firmly discouraged scrupulosity of conscience, a temptation he found both in choir nuns and lay sisters.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, he directed their minds toward the love of God and His mercy, rather than toward fear and scruples, as “scrupulosity imprisons the human spirit, while love sets it free” (Rodrigues 2002: 129). As Dame Teresa Rodrigues (2002) wrote, Baker wanted to free the nuns

from their inhibitions and enable them to stand before God with hearts strong and free. In order to do so it was necessary to encourage them to take the large view of God’s goodness so that they might reach out to him in love. (130)

In other words, “for him God’s love would be the liberating effort” (Rodrigues 2002: 130). He told the nuns:

Because that you women (especially those that I write for) are of your owne natures very fearfull and in a contemplatiue course, in one that hath a good will feare is not to be cherished, but rather to be kept vnder. Therefore take heed that vpon no occasions, as of what you heare,

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<sup>52</sup> From: personal correspondence (email) with Dr, Scholastica Susan Jacob, dated 11 July 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>55</sup> “Benedictine monasteries until the Second Vatican Council [...] divided the community into choir and lay members. The former devoted their lives to prayer, in the choir and in private meditation and took solemn vows (for life). The requirement for entrance as a choir nun was generally dependent upon the woman’s level of education, social status, and the dowry she could bring to the community. Lay-sisters took simple vows—renewable and more easily terminable—and were distinguished by subtle differences in the habit. Their main work was manual labor, and they were not expected to participate in the Office, although they had their own ‘Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary’, or to do the reading and study required of choir nuns. The term ‘nun’ (moniale) refers to choir nuns in solemn vows and that of ‘sister’ (soror) to lay or apostolic sisters in simple vows. The official title for a professed Benedictine choir nun is ‘dame’ and the correct use of the title ‘dame’ and ‘sister’ was strictly observed until the 1960s” (Jacob 2022: 32).



see or reade, you do not nourish in yourselues any more feare [...]. (Book D., p. 79, cited in Rodrigues 2002: 130)

Baker reported here the cultural assumptions of his time and culture, at least as far as women were concerned—in this case, the fact they were “fearful” and hence had a tendency toward a scrupulosity of conscience. Baker reminds them to always avoid fear, as this was necessary, he believed, to finally reach union and intimacy with God (Rodrigues 2002: 136). In the following passage, Baker described this liberating escape from fear in one of his most faithful disciples, Dame Gertrude More:

Passing over all fears, scruples, and uncertain matters, and aspiring towards God by means of efficacious mentall prayer, [she] will daily grow more and more confident in love, with decay of servile fear and selfe-love; and nature, and evill customes gotten by former inordinate practise about confessions, will come to be reformed, and the soul come to a calmnesse or serenity of conscience; to which the case being arrived, she will see the folly of her former case and practice wherein she yielded so much to inordinate fears by inordinate confessions, and will joy in her present case, being full of joy and of the divine love which she is come to by the practice of such instructions as these be. (Baker, *Secure Stay*, p. 24, cited in Rodrigues 2002: 132)

It is interesting here to note how, in the experience of More, this liberation from fear led to her growing more confident in the love of God, as well as to a “calmness and serenity” of conscience, until she could finally reach, through the practice of contemplation, union with God, which was her true happiness. Baker also defined More’s previous experiences of confessions as “inordinate” and a great “impediment” for her, as they did not liberate her from fear, but rather entangled her in them and thus impeded her union with God.

Van Hying (2013) argues that by “minimizing the importance of confession—one of the few forums in which nuns could be monitored and guided by male clerics—Baker generated scrutiny and eventually anger from the official Cambrai confessors” (144). His approach to spiritual life in fact raised a storm of controversy, as he was accused of affording the nuns too much freedom and spiritual independence in such a delicate issue as the discerning of God’s voice from the devil’s—and this especially at a time when the Catholic Church was very concerned with heresy and closely monitored women’s spiritual lives (Van Hying 2013: 144–45). We will return to this controversy at the end of the chapter and examine the role played in it by the Cambrai nuns themselves.

Another central aspect of Baker's spirituality was abnegation or, in other words, mortification. Again, this was not some new doctrine created by Baker. Rather, it was in line with the so-called "death of the old self" of which St Paul spoke, for example, in Colossians 3. Baker defined mortification as follows:

Mortification is an act of doinge or suffringe whereby we do contradict the natural desire of sense or of the will; and by frequency of such acts we do attaine to a state or habit of mortification, which is to be fully mortified, or as it were dead in our soul and in the senses of the dead body to all inordinate appetites and desires; such acts of mortification are exercises either internally in prayer or out of prayer internally or externally. (Book D, p. 8, cited in Rodrigues 2002: 145)

For Baker, mortification meant the discipline of dying to oneself to be replenished by God's presence. What is meant here by the word "dying" is a renunciation of one's inordinate desires and affections for earthly things and/or people. Mortification also required a sort of abandonment into God's hands, knowing that He created our soul and knew best its way forward. Therefore everything that would fall upon it, was meant to bear a better fruit and lead to an advancement in the spiritual way of the soul:

God is the most cunninge artesman about our soule, who best knows how to worke and frame her, and bringe her to be according to his owne mind and likeinge [...]; the soulee is to resigne vp to God all such satisfaction, contentment and complacence, reseruinge nothinge at all thereof to herselfe, saue only the imperfection that she committed in the vndergoinge of mortification. (Book H, pp. 4–5, cited in Rodrigues 2002: 146)

It is important to underline here that the Rule of St Benedict did not encourage voluntary or extraordinary mortifications for their own sake. Quite the contrary, all the difficulties and hardships that the novices might have encountered were already seen as necessary mortification and were to be accepted, in a spirit of resignation, for advancing in the love of God, who permitted them in his providence. In other words, they were a means, but not an end in themselves. Baker also discouraged the use of

voluntary penances for two reasons: the life of the nuns was demanding enough without adding anything to it in the way of extra physical hardship—if anything he encouraged them

to ask for dispensations rather than damage their health by imprudent zeal. (Rodrigues 2002: 143)

“Secondly voluntary penances could be no more than an expression of self-will and, as such, destructive of the spiritual enterprise” (Rodrigues 2002: 144). According to Baker, religious life already provided all the necessary mortification, and he deprecated those superiors or directors who imposed extra mortifications on their subjects for no good reason (Rodrigues 2002: 144–45).<sup>56</sup>

As Rodrigues (2002) wrote, “prayer and mortification are almost always coupled in Baker’s thought” (143) and prayer itself is actually “the most effective mortification” (144). Regarding prayer, Baker encouraged an extension of its time for the nuns, but he never prescribed a particular form of prayer. Rather, he let each nun find the type of spiritual exercise that best suited her (Baker 2002: xxx). “Individual experience, as well as ‘divine grace and lighte’ would ‘teach [...] both the matter & manner of [...] prayer’” (Temple 2019: 26). He distinguished four types of prayer: vocal; discursive, or meditative; prayer of immediate acts—“a direct and private conversation with Christ” (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 3938); and prayer of sensible affection, which, as the term itself suggests, “called upon emotions and senses”, rather than the intellect (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 3938). Baker then added a fifth type of prayer, that of aridity, to be used in case of bodily or spiritual difficulties. Theoretically, the various types were sequential and intended to prepare the soul for contemplation or mystic union, however, depending on each nun’s needs and dispositions, she might choose the type which best suited her. All were based on the imagination and the senses, and they were thus only preparatory for contemplation, since the latter implied an abstraction from the senses (Baker 2002: xxxiii).

As mentioned above, the type of prayer that Baker found particularly useful for women in general, and for nuns of contemplative orders in particular, was the so-called “prayer of sensible affection” (Baker 2002: xxxviii, 72), considered suitable for those having a natural affective disposition and who rejected discursive prayer (Baker 2002: xxxviii). It consisted of “spontaneous affective aspirations (or short ejaculatory prayers)” (Goodrich 2019: 606). As Freeman (2001) explains, “the aspiration is a phrase which is repeated continually in the heart and in which thoughts and images are transcended” (200). In other words, it is like a mantra, which can be repeated continuously while you are working or reading (Freeman 2001: 200). Following the Victorines, St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, and, more specifically, the author of “The Cloud of Unknowing”, “Baker taught that in the higher forms of contemplative prayer love transcends the powers of the intellect,

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<sup>56</sup> See also Rodrigues (2012).

and though he in no way deposed understanding and knowledge, he constantly emphasized the role of the affective powers” (Higgins 1963: 136). In a treatise written before 1630, Baker explained:

Women are, generally speaking, less apt for meditation than men, and by consequence, more fit for the more perfect exercises of the will, by reason that they are more disabled in judgment and invention, and more abounding in will and affections, so that in them the will draws the stream from the understanding; therefore great care is to be taken that they be not compelled without necessity to tarry long in discursive exercises, lest thereby they may be much prejudiced in the head and spirit, with little or no profit any way, but much harm in being detained from the more proper and beneficial exercise of the will in holy affections. (Baker, *Holy Wisdom*, p. 407, cited in Higgins 1963: 136)

Baker makes no attempt here to hide his, or indeed his contemporaries’, prejudices and commonly held beliefs regarding the inferiority of women’s bodies and minds, and their consequent inferior aptitude for meditation and discursive prayer. Since they were believed to abound in will and affections, the latter should be, in Baker’s understanding, their prime exercise of prayer.<sup>57</sup>

These ideas about women could also be found in Baker’s teachings on spiritual reading, which enriched the instructions already contained in the Rule and in the Constitutions of the Benedictine order (Wolfe 2004: 136–37). Baker’s treatises and advice books were full of ambiguities and contradictions regarding the role of reading in a nun’s spiritual life, mainly because of his and his contemporaries’ prejudices and commonly held beliefs regarding the inferiority of women’s bodies

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<sup>57</sup> At the time of Constable and More, Catholic religious women were allowed to employ vocal prayers only—i.e. they were supposed to repeat some prayers from a booklet. Teresa de Jesús (or of Avila) was the first woman religious who desired and strove for an “unmediated communication with God” (Dopico-Black 2014: 109) and she detailed the soul’s journey to God in her “Interior Castle” (1588). For her heterodox ideas regarding women and prayer, she was persecuted by the Inquisition, but at the same time she opened a new spiritual path for women of her time. After his conversion to Catholicism, Baker started to read Catholic devotional texts including those of Avila, who was among the authors he proposed to the Cambrai nuns. Gertrude More herself cited Avila and claimed that she had influenced her spirituality.

and minds, and the consequent belief that too much reading was particularly demanding for women and could cause physical damage (Wolfe 2004: 141).

Baker always stressed the importance of “reading for the love of God rather than for knowledge or delight” (Wolfe 2004: 139). He closely monitored the books the nuns read and prepared reading lists, according to each nun’s needs and spiritual progress (Van Hyning 2013: 144).<sup>58</sup> As Dorothy Latz (1997) noted, he “established a veritable atelier at Our Lady of Consolation at Cambrai, where the English Benedictine nuns translated, copied, collected, and were inspired to imitate medieval and 16-17<sup>th</sup> century spiritual and mystical writings” (15). In addition, Baker composed numerous treatises, advice books, and prayer manuals himself to enrich and enlarge the convent’s library (Walker 2004: 240). The library also “included texts such as “The Quiet of the soule”, based on Juan de Bonilla’s short treatise of the quiet of the soul”; “St Tiresia her life”; and “the Clowde”, based on the mystical tome “The Cloud of Unknowing”, a well-known text of Christian mysticism written in Middle English in the fourteenth century.<sup>59</sup> Baker even wrote to the antiquarian Sir Robert Cotton in the hope he would lend more books to the Abbey:

Their lives being contemplative the comon bookes of the worlde are not for their purpose, and litle or nothing is in thes daies printed in English that is prop[er] for them. There were manie good English bookes in olde time whereof thoughe they have some, yet they want manie. (BL Cotton MS Jul.C.iii, fol. I87, cited in Wolfe 2004: 138)

Spiritual reading was also the first of the three stages of mental prayer that Baker identified and taught. It was also called meditation and had to be practiced for several hours a day in silence.<sup>60</sup> Baker recommended mystical books to the nuns as a general guide, but they had to discover what passages resonated best with them. Since he “considered God to be the one true ‘prime guide’ to the mystical life” (Temple 2019: 30), each nun should find her own way and there was no common path for everybody.<sup>61</sup> The second stage was active contemplation, also called “spiritual aspirations” or “spiritual elevations”. It was called active because it involved the exercise of the will and an abstraction from the senses: “I meant a certein retirement of the soule from all the trouble and mist

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<sup>58</sup> See Rhodes (1993).

<sup>59</sup> Plante, Kelly. “Baker and his Mysticism.” In *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. Eds. Jaime Goodrich and Kelly Plante. <s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/>. Date accessed: [14 July 2021].

<sup>60</sup> Plante, Kelly. “Writing and the Cambrai Benedictines.” In *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. Eds. Jaime Goodrich and Kelly Plante. <s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/>. Date accessed: [14 July 2021].

<sup>61</sup> Plante, Kelly. “Religious Politics among the Cambrai Benedictines.” In *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. Eds. Jaime Goodrich and Kelly Plante. <s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/>. Date accessed: [14 July 2021].

caused by sensible images and a presenting of her to an immediate cleere and quiet conversation with God and actuation towards him [...]” (Baker 2002: xli). After this step, reading was discouraged to avoid reading for pleasure.<sup>62</sup>

The third and final step of mental prayer was passive contemplation, or mystic union (Walker 2004: 139). Mystic union was understood by Baker as an abstraction from materiality and the bodily senses used to achieve a direct affective and spiritual contact with God and it was Him who conceded this special grace and favor upon the soul (More 2009: xii–xiii). “This phase involved using the previous steps to show how ‘God was to be contemplated ‘about all images and formes’” (Wolfe 2004: 140). Baker considered passive contemplation as the “pinnacle of contemplative experience” and encouraged both monks and nuns to aim for it through constant practice and dedication, although, as previously argued, there was no proof he reached it himself during his life and, even if he did, it was perhaps but once.<sup>63</sup>

I now turn my attention to investigate Baker’s understanding of mysticism, in the historical context of early modern post-Reformation England.

#### **4.4 Mysticism in Early Modern England and Baker’s Idea of Mystic Union with God**

As David Lunn (1975) wrote, “strictly speaking, mysticism is the union of the soul with God, or the ultimate stages in the search of it, using self-denial and the prayer of contemplation for its attainment” (267). Drawing from the Benedictine Rule and from medieval spiritual authors such as Walter Hilton and the Pseudo-Dionysius, Baker firmly discouraged visionary experiences and other extraordinary bodily manifestations. He preferred writers “who talked of contemplation not as the extraordinary experience of a privileged few but as the normal goal of every Christian” (Norman 1976: 206). Gertrude More, who came to be considered his “star pupil” at Cambrai (Baker 2002: xxv), believed and acted “on the principle that contemplation is the normal means of approaching God in prayer for all Christians, not the exclusive privilege of a few specially gifted souls” (Norman 1976: 208). As Liam Peter Temple (2019) argues, in the seventeenth century most writers would have understood the word “mysticism” through other terms, such as “‘mystical theology’ or ‘mystical divinity’” (10). An English Franciscan friar called Nicholas of the Holy Cross produced an interesting definition of the latter in 1670:

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<sup>62</sup> Plante, Kelly. “Writing and the Cambrai Benedictines.” In *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. Eds. Jaime Goodrich and Kelly Plante. <[s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/](http://s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/)>. Date accessed: [14 July 2021].

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

*Mystick Divinity* is defined an *experimental knowledge* of God [...] by which Man tastes the *sweetness* of God, and by this *experience* teaches the *understanding* what God is: Now this *savour, tast, or spiritual feeling* may be said to be a kind of *knowing*; because love itself according to St. *Austin* is a *knowledge*; but a *knowledge* so *secret* as *unintelligible* to any but the person in whom it is; as it is commonly said of a *smart pain*, none can so justly *conceive* it as he that *suffers*. (Temple 2019: 10, emphasis in original)

In this definition, mysticism is understood as a form of “experimental knowledge” (Temple 2019: 10)—in other words, as a personal experience of God through love. The idea of love as a kind of knowledge had a clear resonance in Baker’s doctrines. Baker in fact defined mysticism “as the process by which the individual rejected all knowledge, mortified their senses and accessed experiences ‘concealed and hidden from all human wisdom [sic]’, which God taught only ‘to little ones, who are the humble and those that love him’” (Temple 2019: 30). These experiences of God are ineffable, as human language is unable either to capture them fully, or to report them accurately (Hollywood 2009: 304).<sup>64</sup> The idea of the ineffability of the mystical encounter with God drew upon Biblical images, such as Moses’ conversation with God on Mount Sinai or the Songs of Songs, but also from concepts such as “divine darkness, carnal eroticism and interior states of ascension towards God” (Temple 2019: 10).

Temple (2019) argued that the early modern period was “a key period of distrust, suspicion and derision towards mystical experience in the West” (1). Unlike the medieval period, in which mysticism enjoyed a privileged position, it later declined in popularity and came to be considered “inherently esoteric, one which was unintelligible to the wider Christian community” (Temple 2019: 10). It was considered irrational and fanatical, and hence lost its place among those sources of knowledge considered legitimate at the time (Temple 2019: 14–15). As a consequence, writers of mysticism began to “claim authority through their relation to a long tradition of authors, identified for the first time as ‘mystics’” (Temple 2019: 14–15). This is exactly what Baker did: he read and adapted “previous works of mystical experience to build a ‘canon’ of what he referred to as ‘mystick authors’” (Temple 2019: 25). He is in fact considered “the first writer in the English language to have referred to mystical writers as ‘mysticks’ in this way” (Temple 2019: 25). Interestingly, spiritual authors such as Pseudo-Dionysius (the Aeropagite) became a sort of “seal of quality” (Temple 2019: 15) of past mystical tradition and he is among the authors Baker referred to in his reading lists for the Cambrai nuns.

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<sup>64</sup> For a deeper discussion on the issue of language and mysticism, see Katz (1992).

Baker tried to build connections to the mystical tradition of Pre-Reformation England and to create a large canon that included not only pre-Reformation English writers, but also patristic works from Europe (Hutton and Van Hyning 2012: 86–87). In so doing, he wanted to continue the English Catholic past in order to link it to the nuns’ exiled present. Baker wanted to construct a “unified idea of how to achieve mystical union—by reconciling terms and ideas from across huge historical and temporal divides” (Hutton and Van Hyning 2012: 105). He believed that the nuns under his direction could achieve mystical union with God thanks to the methods proposed by the authors he suggested (Hutton and Van Hyning 2012: 86–87) and thanks to the discernment of their “internal call” and spiritual needs (Hutton and Van Hyning 2012: 99). In his reading lists, he included authors

from the desert fathers, Basil and Benedict, to the high middle ages of St Bernard and the Victorines, the English and Rhineland mystics of the fourteenth century, sixteenth-century authors such as Blossius, Teresa and John of the Cross, William Bonde and Richard Whitford, and contemporary authors such as Benet Fitch [...], Francis de Sales [...], and de la Puente [...]. (Rhodes 1993: 170)

Interestingly, a number of female mystics were also included in his suggestions (Temple 2019: 28). Among them were Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Angela of Foligno, Saint Gertrude, and Saint Bridget (Rhodes 1993).<sup>65</sup>

To sum up, we could say mysticism was understood by Baker as nothing extraordinary, ecstatic, or visionary, but rather as a personal experience of internal union with God through love. In suggesting this affective path to the nuns under his direction, he was following a long and transnational tradition of affective piety, to which we now turn our attention.

#### **4.5 The Tradition of Affective Piety**

As Rosalynn Voaden (2014) writes:

Affective piety is a form of meditation which focuses on the Nativity and Passion of Christ—those events of his life which most vividly feature his humanity, that is, his bodiliness. Worshippers are encouraged to imagine themselves present at the events of Christ’s life, to visualize the scene in great detail, and to suffer and rejoice with those who participated in those events. (398–99)

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<sup>65</sup> It was at Our Lady of Good Hope in Paris, Cambrai’s daughter house, that the “Showings” of Julian of Norwich were first published, from one manuscript at the abbey (Latz 1997: 14). See also Goodrich (2017).



Between the twelfth and the fifteenth century, affective piety held great appeal for women, while most male mystics experienced intellectual visions. This gender division may be attributed to several factors: First, most treatises on intellectual visions were in Latin, and so they were less accessible to women, even those enclosed, the majority of whom were not schooled in Latin. Second, intellectual vision rejected the body and the senses, both of which were considered the primary attributes of women at that time. Finally, imaginative vision, unlike its intellectual counterpart, almost always implied a divine imperative to communicate it to others, and since women were forbidden to preach, their visions were usually disseminated in writing and thus provided models for other women to understand and express their contemplative practices (Voaden 2014: 399). The combination of women and visions was treated with profound suspicion by the Catholic Church, also because women were considered, by definition, more easily deceived. Moreover, direct contact with God through visions did not require the need for priestly intervention and hence threatened male sacerdotal authority. For these reasons, female visionaries were most often placed under the guidance of a male spiritual director, who would then serve as editor to the women's revelations, thus ensuring their orthodoxy (Voaden 2014: 399).

Modern studies of mysticism highlighted the eroticism and the sensuality of female mystical encounters with God, particularly in the writings of the Beguines of the Low Countries and Northern Germany from the thirteenth century onward.<sup>66</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum (1987, 1991), for instance, demonstrated in her numerous pioneering studies on medieval women's embodied mysticism that medieval mystical encounters with God were mainly expressed by women in erotic and sensual terms (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4074).<sup>67</sup> Bernard McGinn (1992), however, pointed out that accounts of erotic love in the Christian mystical tradition started not with a woman, but with a man, Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–c. 253), who considered the Song of Songs one of the most important books in the Bible and defined the Christian theology as “nuptial”, as it demonstrated the love of God for humanity (Nelstrop 2020: 329). Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153; and the subsequent Cistercian tradition) also developed an erotic and nuptial imagery in his numerous sermons on the Canticles, as well as in his treatises on loving God (Nelstrop 2020: 332). More specifically, Clairvaux opted for a “nuptial understanding of the Song of Songs in a more intimate direction” (Nelstrop 2020: 333), as he interpreted the bride and bridegroom of the Canticles as the Church and Christ, respectively. Alongside Clairvaux, other twelfth-century male authors explored the erotic in Christian theology,

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<sup>66</sup> See, among others, Hollywood (2002) and Petroff (1994).

<sup>67</sup> By the term “sensual”, we mean here an experience connected with the senses and with physical feelings (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4021) and by “erotic” we mean the use of “images evocative of a sexual encounter” (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4074), suggesting “fusion, merging, melting or drowning” with the body of Christ (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4021).

for example Richard of St. Victor (1110–1173) in his *Four Degrees of Violent Love* and William of St. Thierry (1085–1148), who used to be a Benedictine abbot, but later joined the Cistercian order (Nelstrop 2020: 335). It must be said that all of the above echoed St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of the founding fathers of the Western mystical tradition whose mystical theology of love was extremely influential at the time (Nelstrop 2020: 335). These authors contributed to opening the way for “sensual discussions of mystical marriage and for erotic encounters with the divine in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries” (Nelstrop 2020: 337), to be found for the most part in the writings of women. This was the so-called *brautmystik* (“bridal mysticism”) tradition of women visionaries, which drew from the Song of Songs, in which the mystical union with God was described through the metaphor of the soul as *sponsa Christi* and through an erotic language between the male bridegroom, representing Christ, and the female bride, representing the Church (Barresi 2022: 41–43). As Voaden (2014: 398) explained, this language and images derived directly from the Song of Songs and from Clairvaux’s sermons, as well as from southern French troubadour lyrics and the *minnesang* of the Low Countries.

Erotic metaphors, together with the idea of a mystical marriage with God, were also frequently employed in the thirteenth century in Rhineland and in the Low Countries, especially among Dominican nuns influenced by Eckhart and his followers Tauler and Suso. As previously argued, these authors were well known to Baker, and they were among his suggested readings to the Cambrai nuns, alongside “Gregory of Nyssa, Blosius, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh and Rich of St Victor, St Bonaventure, Ruysbroeck, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Àvila and many others besides” (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4024). Due to the decline of mysticism in the early modern period as a legitimate form of knowledge and the consequent suspicion connected to it, especially as far as women were concerned, Baker tried to build connections with the English pre-Reformation mystical tradition to authorize the nuns’ contemplative practices at Cambrai. For these reasons, it could be said that an affective spirituality may have been a safe middle ground for the Cambrai nuns, as it placed them inside a longer and well-established transnational tradition.

#### **4.6 The Controversy Over Baker’s Spiritual Course and the Role Played by the Cambrai Nuns**

Although Baker always followed the Rule, he guided the nuns toward “spiritual self-sufficiency” (Van Hyning 2013: 144) and inward meditative practices, which seemed “impenetrable” to the official confessors (Van Hyning 2013: 145). Hence, his approach to spiritual life raised a storm of controversy, as he was accused of leaving too much freedom and spiritual independence to the nuns (Van Hyning 2013: 144–45). His doctrines bore a similarity to Protestant ideals of individual contact

with God, and after Baker's death, some of his writings did in fact circulate in Protestant circles (Van Hyning 2013: 145). Moreover, instead of following the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises of imaging and discourse, which had become fashionable in Continental convents, Baker revived the medieval form of contemplation through the study and sharing of fourteenth-century texts such as Julian of Norwich's "Showing of Love", Walter Hilton's "Scale of Perfection", William Flete's "Remedies Against Temptations", "The Cloud of Unknowing", and the works of John Tauler and Henry Suso.<sup>68</sup> It was for these reasons that his teachings raised such suspicion and fear, and led to upheaval inside the community.

While most of the Cambrai nuns were his disciples, a small number followed Fr Francis Hull, who had been appointed official confessor to the convent in 1629. In 1632 Hull accused Baker of unorthodox teachings and anti-authoritarian doctrine. As a result, Baker had to appear before the General Chapter of the English Benedictine congregation. Hull accused Baker of "Quietism, Illuminism, undermining clerical authority by empowering women, and creating a faction of followers" (Van Hyning 2013: 153). He composed a list of sixteen objections to Baker's teachings in which he contended that he diminished the authority of superiors and gave more to women. In "A Vindication", Baker responded to Hull's objections and foregrounded the voices of his supporters, in particular those of the then abbess Catherine Gascoigne and Gertrude More (Van Hyning 2013: 153–54), two of his most devoted disciples. The accusations of Hull and the responses of Gascoigne and More raised profound issues, from the authority of abbesses with respect to male spiritual advisors, to the boundaries of clerical intervention in discerning the nuns' call and their relationship with God, as their primary spiritual guide (Van Hyning 2013: 155–56). The General Chapter read Baker's corpus in full, and he eventually cleared him of any heretical teachings, but to mitigate the polemic, he removed Baker (and Hull) from Cambrai. Baker was first sent to St. Gregory's College in Douai and later to England in 1638. Baker died in London in 1641 (Walker 2004: 241).

Following Baker's departure and subsequent death, many of the Cambrai sisters continued to practice and disseminate his teachings, even beyond the walls of the Cambrai monastery, so much so that in 1655, a resurgence of anti-Baker sentiment arose within the English Benedictine Congregation. Meanwhile, the Benedictine Hugh Paulinus Serenus Cressy (1605–1674) was preparing a "digest" of Baker's works (Van Hyning 2013: 166), which he later published as "Sancta Sophia" (Douai, 1657) and which aimed at rehabilitating perceptions of his work (Goodrich 2021: 134). Claude White, then president of the English Benedictine Congregation, argued that "Baker's writings encouraged rogue individualism, discord within the convents, and worst of all, his treatises neglected to teach practitioners how to discern the operations of the devil from those of God" (Van Hyning 2013: 165).

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<sup>68</sup> See: <http://www.umilta.net/cath.html> [last accessed: 12 May 2022].

He ordered the abbess Catherine Gascoigne to relinquish all original texts by Baker in order to clear them of what he considered erroneous doctrines. Gascoigne, however, firmly resisted White's command and threats (Walker 2004: 242). Oliver Cromwell's spymaster John Thurloe took possession of a series of letters by Gascoigne, known to the critics as "The Bodleian Letters", which enlightened this controversy. Jaime Goodrich (2021) offers a detailed analysis of them in chapter four of her recently published book *Writing Habits*. In the following section I examine some of the most interesting moments of this controversy, as the letters reveal a strong capacity for autonomous action on the part of Gascoigne, who was able to successfully strategize to protect both Baker's reputation and his spiritual course, from which she had personally benefitted.

In a letter dated March 3, 1655, Gascoigne wrote to Augustine Conyers: "the Bookes are declared to containe poysonous, pernicious & diabolicall Doctrine, My selfe in a damnable way running to perdition, & Mr Walgrave [the house's confessor] to maintaine a faction" (Gascoigne, Letters, 45). Gascoigne believed that, by requesting all of Baker's original manuscripts, White had a plan to censor them:

he meant not to alienat any thing from our convent but to purge the Bookes that we might not feed upon poisnous doctrine, and he repeated many passages of our petition interpreting them in a strange sense, and said that to persist in it was absolut disobedience, with many other terrifieing speeches. (Gascoigne, Letters, 49)

In the middle of such controversy, White was suddenly called away from Cambrai, but he promised to return by Easter and take possession of the books, despite the nuns' refusal. The correspondence then abruptly ends, so it is impossible to know how the saga ended (Goodrich 2021: 136). Of most interest here is how this dispute was so strictly related to a question of obedience to superiors. The Cambrai nuns were considered "disobedient" as they refused to obey White, despite their obligation to do so, as he was their superior. Their refusal and intransigence might also have allowed old concerns about Baker's teachings and texts to resurface. In 1632, Hull had in fact claimed that Baker encouraged disobedience to certain superiors: "They have this Doctrin amongst them, that so much respect and Obedience is not to be given to Vicarius, Abbesse, or other Superior, that is not a Contemplative person" (Goodrich 2021: 136). The pressure exercised by White on the nuns in order to force obedience was extreme: he threatened to withhold the community's annual financial subsidy and even banned the nuns from hearing Mass (Goodrich 2021: 136). In response to that, Gascoigne strategically implied that "their obedience to the Congregation was conditional rather than absolute" (Goodrich 2021: 136)—in other words, it was limited to their not abusing their power. She threatened

to withdraw from the jurisdiction of the Congregation and submit to the authority of the local bishop, instead. Finally, she orchestrated a plan to send Baker's books to Paris to keep them safe, but such measure was not necessary, as White died suddenly a few months later in October 1655. The whole polemic between Gascoigne and White was therefore silenced, although not the dispute over Baker's doctrines (Walker 2004: 242). The reputation of the Cambrai monastery was in fact badly damaged, and the numbers of new entrants plunged after 1655. However, in 1657, "Sancta Sophia" and "Holy Practices"—a digest of Baker's writings composed by Cressy—were published in an attempt to rehabilitate Baker's legacy and Paul Robinson, an ally of the Cambrai nuns, became president of the Congregation (Goodrich 2021: 137).

As we have seen, Gascoigne's letters stand as a testament to her agentic capacity in defending Baker's spiritual path and in rejecting blind obedience to superiors. Another Cambrai Benedictine, Gertrude More, exploited the polemical nature of print to further rehabilitate Baker's reputation. Her *Spiritual Exercises*, published in Paris in 1658, at first sight seemed a devotional treatise only, however, they actually served as a public defense of Baker (Goodrich 2021: 133). In a section called "Apology", More offered a long commentary on obedience to superiors, defending the soul's interior liberty. Moreover, another section of the Exercises entitled "Confessiones", which responded to a more private aim of encouraging the soul in moments of desolation, also served the purpose of describing the spiritual benefits for More of Baker's contemplative practices. Although Baker had been removed from Cambrai some five years before another woman, Barbara Constable, entered the monastery, in her writings we find "the same tone as those of Dame Gertrude More, the same mental and spiritual background, the same impassioned love of God" (Stanbrook Abbey 1956: 22). "In all probability she never saw Father Baker, yet it is to her more than to any one else that we owe the extant copies of the Baker manuscripts" (Stanbrook Abbey 1956: 22). As a matter of fact, in the 1640s and 1650s, Constable was the "primary transcriber" of Baker's treatises, some of which were transmitted to England and to other English Benedictine monasteries (Wolfe 2007: 165).

In the following chapters I seek a deeper understanding of More's, Constable's, and Gascoigne's spirituality, as developed under Baker's guidance, as well as their personal involvement in the Baker controversy. This will be done through a close reading of their religious writings from a feminist perspective on religious women's agency and on mysticism. The analysis will be centered around the following research questions: How do I see the agency of these women religious? What is the purpose of their texts? How do they personally interpret or adapt Baker's spiritual advice, and how does it impact on their agentic capacity? What kind of spirituality and mysticism can be discerned in their texts? We will answer these questions drawing on the theoretical and contextual information gathered in this, and preceding chapters.

## 5 “O that I did truly love! For by love only my soul shall become capable of understanding truth”: Dame Gertrude More’s *Spiritual Exercises* (1658) from a Feminist Perspective on Religious Women’s Agency and Mysticism<sup>69</sup>

### 5.1 Introduction

In *Writing Habits: Historicism, Philosophy, and English Benedictine Convents, 1600–1800*, Jaime Goodrich (2021)—a renowned scholar of English religious women’s writings from the early modern period—issues a call for further research in early modern studies from a feminist philosophical perspective. The potential Goodrich sees in this approach is its capacity to “offer precious insight into the ways that early modern believers understood and sought to engage with God, on both a personal and a collective level” (164). Insights such as these could also be of relevance to the contemporary reader who, despite their own religious positionality, needs to find an answer to the philosophical question of God’s existence (164). Moreover, although the quest to locate and analyze women’s writings is already grounded in feminist theory, the latter could also “generate new critical theories that alter our understanding of early modern textual production” (Goodrich 2021: 165). This chapter attempts to answer Goodrich’s call by examining the religious writings of the seventeenth-century English Benedictine nun, Gertrude More, through the lens of feminist theories on religious women’s agency, and on mysticism.

Many feminist scholars have tackled the issue of religious women’s agency in what Kelsy Burke (2012: 122) calls “gender traditional” or “conservative religions”, including Jewish, Christian, and Islamic perspectives. For example, Orit Avishai (2008) interprets the agency of Jewish religious women as an authentic religious conduct—one not meant to pursue extra-religious ends, but orthodoxy. Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2001), who studied the experience of Muslim women, defines agency as the “space of action that relations of subordination enable and create” (203). Sarah Bracke (2008) also studied young Muslim women, this time adhering to Milli Görüs, an Islamic movement within the Turkish diaspora in Europe. She concludes that the agency of such women is realized in their striving to achieve a higher level of spirituality through great self-discipline (Bracke 2008). Avishai, Mahmood, and Bracke highlight how the “turn to agency” (Bracke 2008: 62) in feminist

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<sup>69</sup> An abridged version of this chapter was published in *DIVE-IN - An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion*, <https://dive-in.unibo.it/>: Barnabè, D. (2022). “O that I did truly love! For by love only my soul shall become capable of understanding truth’: Dame Gertrude More’s The Spiritual Exercises (1658) From a Feminist Perspective on Religious Women’s Agency and on Mysticism and Gender.” *DIVE-IN – An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion*, 2(1), 33–52. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2785-3233/16035>

Author’s note: When possible, the quotations in this paper keep the original early modern English spelling. Translations into modern English have been provided in square brackets next to each word only when the original spelling could impede the understanding.

theory since the 1990s has led to an oversimplification of the concept of agency itself, as the latter became the equivalent of resistance to patriarchal social norms and of a struggle for freedom, as understood by western liberal cultures. The work of Avishai, Mahmood, and Bracke calls for going beyond the submission/resistance dichotomy and instead proposes so-called “compliant models” of agency (Burke 2012: 123), in which agency is expressed through, rather than despite, religion. More specifically, for such women agency resides in authentic religious conduct.

The analyses of Avishai, Mahmood, and Bracke focus on the contemporary age, where the dynamics of women’s emancipation and secularization are certainly not comparable to those of the seventeenth century. Moreover, their studies regard western as well as non-western religious traditions, whereas this research focuses on a precise religious tradition, namely the English Catholic Benedictine Order. This said, I think their models could offer an interesting perspective via which to interpret the religious experience of Gertrude More. As I will contend, More expressed her agency through, rather than despite, her religious belonging: On the one hand, she managed to change certain forms of male clerical control, not by subverting the clerical hierarchy of the convent, but by wittingly “conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour” (Weber 2012: 48). On the other hand, by building on her spiritual director’s contemplative life teachings, she affirmed her personal way of uniting with God.

Before delving into this analysis, the first part of the chapter will explore More’s life and spiritual life trajectory in greater detail.

## **5.2 Gertrude More: A Leading Voice at Cambrai**

Helen More (1606–1633), religious name Dame Gertrude, was among the founding members of the Cambrai convent “Our Lady of Consolation”, one of the seven English Benedictine cloisters founded in France and Flanders in the aftermath of the Dissolution.<sup>70</sup> Very little is known about her unfortunately short life—she died aged only twenty-seven—and the main source for reconstructing her life, both before and after she took her monastic vows, is her biography, *Life and Death of Dame Gertrude More*, written by her spiritual director, Augustine Baker (1635 or 1636).<sup>71</sup>

More was born in 1606 in Low Leyton, Essex, and died on 17 August 1633. Her father was Cresacre More of Barnburgh Hall, Yorkshire, and her mother Elizabeth Gage of Firle, Sussex (who died when Helen was only five). Helen was the great-great-granddaughter of Sir Thomas More, of

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<sup>70</sup> In the history of Catholicism in England in the early modern period, the years between 1536 and 1540 are also known as the “dissolution of the monasteries and religious orders” realised by King Henry VIII. About eight hundred monasteries and religious houses were dissolved and all their furniture, libraries, and other artistic objects were sold, destroyed, or burned.

<sup>71</sup> There is uncertainty among the critics about the exact date of publication.

whom her father Cresacre wrote a biography. Cresacre initially intended to become a priest and spent ten years as a seminarist, but after his elder brother's death, he was persuaded by his father and friends to get married, to avoid the disappearance of the Catholic line of the Mores. He accepted, and later had one son, Thomas, and two daughters, Helen and Bridget. He personally directed the education of his daughters at home, presumably in the tradition of Thomas More,<sup>72</sup> and he enjoyed the company of Helen as a child, as she was witty and cheerful (Baker 2002: ix).

As a teenager, Helen did not seem attracted to married life, but at the same time she did not consider the religious vocation either. Regardless, her spiritual director in London, Father Bennet Jones, OSB, persuaded her to try a monastic life, and this automatically meant going into exile, as religious orders had been dissolved in England (Baker 2002: ix). Father Bennet Jones wanted to fund a new English Benedictine Convent in the Spanish Netherlands and to this end, he gathered a group of eight gentlewomen, of whom Helen was one. Initially, she had no idea of the life that awaited her and indeed, felt no attraction for it, however, she accepted in order not to disappoint Father Jones. Cresacre More was among the main benefactors of the Cambrai nunnery, and as a consequence, Helen was later to acquire a privileged position in the convent.

She entered the Cambrai nunnery on 2 December 1623 and professed on 1 January 1625, at the age of nineteen. Yet soon after entering monastic life, Helen fell into a state of depression and seemed to avoid any company (Baker 2002: x). Notwithstanding these difficulties, she received the habit of St. Benedict that same year with two of her cousins, Grace and Anne More. The name she took as a nun was Dame Gertrude, in memory of Gertrude of Helfta, a sainted mystic whom she held in great regard (More 2009: x). From 1623 to 1629, under the guidance of the abbess Frances Gawine, religious name Mary Francis, the Cambrai nuns practiced Ignatian spirituality.<sup>73</sup> This, however, was increasingly “felt to be unsuited to the contemplative ideals of the Cambrai community” (Baker 2002: xi), “especially when, with time, the initial flexibility of Loyola's *Exercises* evolved towards a set method of meditation which tended to exclude mystical forms of spirituality” (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 237).

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<sup>72</sup> See Vives (2000), and Jones and Sellers (1978).

<sup>73</sup> Jesuit missionaries were often responsible for recruiting potential postulants among the English gentry for the founding of religious houses on the Continent and they therefore spread their spirituality (Van Hynning 2013: 150). Jesuits played a significant role, for example in the foundation of the first English convent in exile—the Brussels Benedictines (Kelly 2020: 24). Moreover, “Jesuit direction was in great demand in continental convents in the post-Trent Spanish Netherlands and France. This did not apply only to active congregations, but also to enclosed teaching Orders and sometimes to more traditionally contemplative institutions. In the particular context of English Catholicism, it also seems likely that many nuns would have had prior experience of Jesuit confessors at home, in their recusant circles; amongst the Benedictines, several sisters counted Jesuits amongst their close kin. It is therefore not surprising that many Benedictine convents should have relied on Jesuit directors and spirituality, especially since several of them were founded before the revival of the English Benedictine Congregation” (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 237).



Gertrude, who “did not have a distinct call for a religious life” (Baker 2002: xi), struggled to find a form of contemplative prayer that suited her and she ultimately rejected Ignatian prayer. She explained that the *Exercises*, since they were devised for an active order rather than contemplatives, were unsuitable for enclosed nuns (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 238–39). As with other Cambrai sisters, she felt the need for a different type of spiritual direction and guidance. A similar situation also occurred in Brussels, but Cambrai was atypical, since it then developed “its own unique spiritual identity” (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 239), as will be argued in the proceeding paragraphs.<sup>74</sup> The President of the English Benedictine Congregation, Father Rudesind Barlow, acknowledged the problems and so began a diligent search for a suitable spiritual guide for the Cambrai sisters—a search undertaken, at least in part, because More’s dissatisfaction might cause the convent financial problems due to the significant role she played. Fr Barlow finally sent Fr Augustine Baker to Cambrai in 1624, whereupon, in the autumn of the same year, Catherine Gascoigne advised More to meet Baker for the first time—an idea More initially opposed, although they did finally meet.

The next year and a half marked a period of great restlessness for More. Expressions of rebellion and mockery directed toward her superiors were accompanied with thoughts of abandoning the religious life altogether and More would often weep at night. Notwithstanding the above, and for reasons that remain largely unknown, she did not leave Cambrai. Initially, More hoped things would now improve, however, she soon fell victim to the depression that had previously caused her such great distress. Gascoigne now insisted on her seeing Baker again and Gertrude finally accepted. Baker proposed several prayer methods, but none seemed to resonate with More. Nonetheless, Baker persisted, and a breakthrough occurred when he was reading to More from the *Secret Paths of Divine Love* by Constantine Barbanson, which “inspired a deep mystical conversion within her soul” (Temple 2019: 38). According to Baker’s account of Gertrude’s life, after this moment, she found the spiritual path that best suited her:

After he had come to a passage about desolations Gertrude appeared to be deeply moved and said: “Oh! Oh! That must be my way!” [...] She had found that henceforth her way was to be “the way of love” and her life came to be centred on internal prayer and on the directions of the “Divine Inspirations”. (Baker 2002: xiii)

According to Baker, “she needed [...] to be brought into a simplicity of soul which is the immediate disposition to union with God” (Holloway 2004). “Immediate disposition” meant she could access God herself, without a male, patriarchal confessor. Baker called this simply the “way of love”—i.e.

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<sup>74</sup> See Guilday (1914), Lunn (1980), and Walker (2008).

following her internal call.<sup>75</sup> Following her second encounter with Baker, More became quiet and amiable, yet maintained her extrovert nature. Below are two remarkable passages in which she compares her condition before and after the meeting with Baker:

[...] for I had suffered so much before God did bestow the fauour vpon me of being put into a course that was proper for me, and this for neere fiue years after my coming ouer, and had faln into so many great inconueniences and miseries that none could beleuee it, but I that felt it. And though I made this shift a days to set a good face on it, yet in the night I bewailed my miseries with more than ordinary Teares [...]. (More 2009: 90–91)

I found my hart grown, as I may say, as hard as a stone, and nothing would haue been able to haue mollified it, but by being put into a course of prayer, by which a soul tendeth towards God, and learneth of him the lesson of truly humbling, herself. (More 2009: 90–91)

More drew great benefit and comfort from Baker's spiritual guidance and she soon became an advocate of his spirituality, to the point that she was described as his "star pupil" and "an excellent example to prove the validity of his teachings" (Baker 2002: xxv). When Baker was accused of promoting anti-authoritarian and heterodox doctrine for affording the nuns too much freedom and spiritual independence, More wrote a text called *An Apology for Herself and Her Spiritual Guide and Director, the Venerable Augustine Baker* (hereafter the Apology). Baker, keen to make More's legacy known, collected her papers after her death and prepared them for publication, which occurred in 1658 under the title *Confessiones Amantis: The Spiritual Exercises of the Most Vertuous and Religious Dame Gertrude More* (hereafter The Spiritual Exercises).<sup>76</sup> The text is written in English and it contains the Apology, fifty-three Confessions to God, and other sentences, prayers, sayings, and poems found in some of More's papers and in her breviary. These texts originate from More's reflections on the Office and have a collaborative nature, as she describes her contemplative prayer life, directed by Baker, and the latter finds in More a perfect example to prove the validity of his teachings (Walker 2004: 237–55).

It was difficult for More when the General Chapter decided to send Father Francis Hull to Cambrai in 1629 as a chaplain with the title of vicar. He followed a "more prescriptive and structured

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<sup>75</sup> Plante, Kelly. "Biography of More." In Goodrich, Jaime & Plante, Kelly (eds.) *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. <s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/>. Date accessed: [14 July 2021].

<sup>76</sup> The publication of the "Spiritual Exercises" was finalised in Paris in 1658 by a priest called Fr Francis Gascoigne (1605–76), since Baker was removed from Cambrai in 1633.

course of religious direction, in line with Tridentine instructions, which featured the confessor as the central authority in spiritual affairs” (Temple 2019: 39). It was Hull who accused Baker of anti-authoritarian and heterodox doctrine and teachings, and who advised Gertrude and all the nuns who were following Baker to stop seeing him (Baker 2002: xiii). Hull believed that Baker was guilty of giving more authority to women than to priests or confessors, and of encouraging them to apply the principles of mysticism by themselves, even though he considered them unable to do so (Temple 2019: 40). In 1633, in order to solve the dispute, The General Chapter invited both Baker and Hull to present their views—a process that led to Baker’s doctrine being thoroughly examined. Together with Catherine Gascoigne (who had now become abbess of Cambrai), Gertrude More became a leader of the pro-Baker party and the two nuns were also asked to write a description of their prayer method. Their texts were so convincing that Baker was cleared of any suspicion. However, in 1633, he was removed from Cambrai and sent to Douai. Immediately following his departure, Gertrude, who had felt unwell for several days, developed smallpox. Catherine Gascoigne and a number of the other nuns assisted her until her death, which came soon after. They described her sickness thus:

As touching the nature of her sicknes, I suppose you have heard of it; only I will touch one point of it, and that is this: that it was the most loathsome, the most odious, and very neare the plague, and in very deede her flesh both inwardly and outwardly did rotte away, in so much that we had very much adoe to keepe the flies from making themselves nests in her face, and eating it she being alive, and she not at all complaining of them. (Baker 2002: xiv)

More died on 17 August 1633 and was buried at the convent of Premee of the Augustinian canons regular at Cambrai.

Her extant writings include the Apology, the Confessions, some devotional fragments, and several poems. The Confessions and poetry exist in two distinct forms: MS Rawlinson C 581, a mid-seventeenth-century manuscript copy currently held by the Bodleian Library (Oxford, United Kingdom), and “The Spiritual Exercises of the most virtuous and religious D. Gertrude More”, published in 1658 in Paris by the priest Francis Gascoigne—the brother of abbess Catherine Gascoigne. The two versions contain different material and neither represents an ideal version of More’s texts. The Bodleian manuscript contains omissions and errors, while Gascoigne’s edition has typographical errors, omissions, and variations from that held at the Bodleian. To complicate matters still further, Baker also quoted extensively from More’s papers when he wrote his biography of her, “The Life of Trutha” (1635–1636), and some of More’s prayers were also included in Baker’s own

collection of prayers “The Holy Practises of a Divine Lover, or the Sainctly Ideots Deuotions” (Baker 2002: xiv–xv). John Clark meticulously compared the Bodleian manuscript and Gascoigne’s edition in his original-spelling version of the Bodleian manuscript for the series *Analecta Cartusiana*, published in 2007 and entitled “Confessiones Amantis: The Spiritual Exercises of the Most Vertuous and Religious Dame Gertrude More”. To date, he provided the most detailed analysis of the relationship between the Bodleian manuscript, Gascoigne’s version, and Baker’s “Life”.<sup>77</sup>

For centuries, Gascoigne’s was the best-known and most accessible version of More’s texts and it served as the base text for two modern editions of More’s work: Benedict Weld-Blundell’s “The Inner Life and the Writings of Dame Gertrude More”, published in 1910, and Dorothy Latz’s “Glow-Worm Light”: Writings of 17th Century English Recusant Women from Original Manuscripts”, published in 1989. In 2009, Arthur Marotti also produced a facsimile edition of Gascoigne’s text as part of the Ashgate series “The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works”. The latter was chosen as the base text for this chapter since it is the most recent edited version of More’s writings, containing the Apology, the Confessions, and her poems.<sup>78</sup>

Gascoigne dedicated “The Spiritual Exercises” to More’s sister, Bridget More, the prioress at Our Lady of Hope in Paris, Cambrai’s daughter-house. The original manuscript had in fact circulated both in Cambrai and in Paris (Lay 2016: 97). The text does not have only a single “Imprimatur”, but two “Approbations”, and this indicates that the nature of the work was potentially controversial (More 2009: xviii). The second “Approbation”, written by “Fr. Walgravivs Doct. Theol. Monachus and Prior Benedictinus” (More 2009: ij), serves as a confirmation that the book contained no doctrinal error, but it could be considered as an elaboration of the “Imitatio Christi” by Thomas à Kempis (More 2009: xviii):

These Confessions or Soliloques written by the late deceased Dame Gertrude More [...] pious fspring of that Noble and Glorious Martyr Sir Thomas More, Chancellor of England, contayning nothing but a true practise of that diuine Booke of the Imitation of Christ [...] needs no Approbation but a serious recommendation to al such as desire a true pattern to attain to the perfect loue of God by affectiue prayer and practise thereof. [...] Parisis. I. Aprilis 1658. (More 2009: ij)

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<sup>77</sup> For further details regarding the editorial conundrum behind More’s texts, see also: Goodrich, Jamie. “About this edition.” In *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. Eds. Jaime Goodrich and Kelly Plante. <s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/>. Date accessed: [16 July 2021].

<sup>78</sup> In 2020, Jacob Rieyeff edited the first complete version of More’s poetry, which also contains the Apology (but not the Confessions). The book is entitled *Poems and Counsels on Prayer and Contemplation: Dame Gertrude More*.

The book opens with a poem dedicated to Thomas More, followed by the dedicatory epistle to Bridget More by Francis Gascoigne. Gascoigne also reworked the original text via the addition of italics and pointer-hands. Kitty Scoular Datta (2002) affirms that

passages marked in the 1658 volume by a small pointer-hand are the most radical. Since Baker's posthumous reputation in the Benedictine Order was cleared only three years before the volume's publication date, the volume may be seen as part of a campaign by Baker's disciples in his exoneration and for the spread of his ideas which Gertrude's own writing exemplified. (55)

"The Spiritual Exercises" became easily accessible outside the walls of Cambrai, by other exiled nuns on the Continent, by members of the English Benedictine Congregation and by Catholics, and possibly Protestants, living in England (Lay 2011: 103). Therefore, although they might appear simply as personal devotional writings, they are profoundly implicated in the controversy over Baker's teachings and, as such, possess a deep religious, social, and even political value.

### 5.3 Obedience to Superiors

In *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, Alison Weber (1990) demonstrated how this well-known seventeenth-century Carmelite mystic exploited a self-depreciatory language in her writings as a rhetorical strategy that enabled her to ultimately affirm her identity and her agency. In the case of Gertrude More's *Spiritual Exercises*, I would argue that we encounter a similar strategy, notwithstanding, of course, that More belonged to a different spiritual tradition from Avila, namely the Benedictine. More refers to herself, and to women in general, as "silly" three times (Confessions 47, 189) and she uses the terms "vnworthy", "vnworthiest", and "vnworthines" thirty times to describe herself and her speaking.<sup>79</sup> In addition, in the Confessions she defines herself as being "contemptible" (25, 156, 189), "poor" (253, 255, 256), "imperfect" (256), "ungrateful" (301), a "wretch" (235, 291) and, finally, "wicked" (286). This submissive and derogatory tone betrays More's religious background on the necessary "low and plain style" of female speech (Goodrich 2019: 599), but it contrasts with the strength of her arguments, which, as we shall see in the following paragraphs, are anything but weak.

Kitty Scoular Datta (2002: 54) revealed how, behind the surface of the apparent modest writing of the Apology, addressing primarily herself and other nuns, More showed an anti-

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<sup>79</sup> Apology 27; Confessions 23, 25, 26, 58, 59, 60, 62, 81, 125, 153, 156, 169, 195, 205, 234, 235, 253, 255, 256, 259, 267, 286-287, 288, 291, 293, 296, 298, 299, 301.

authoritarian nature: she is critical of blind obedience to superiors, defends Bakers' teachings against any accusations, and advocates a spiritual model in which the soul can have a direct relationship with God, without the intermediary role of a male confessor.

Jenna Lay “built upon [...] Datta’s scholarship in order to spotlight More’s role in supporting the development of female agency within the context of her convent”.<sup>80</sup> Lay (2016) explores More’s criticism of “blind obedience” to superiors and states that “her written confessions marked her not only as Sir Thomas More’s descendant but also as his intellectual successor in resisting unlawful authority” (91). More certainly recognized the necessity to obey the authorities as far as earthly matters were concerned, but regarding her devotion, she criticized those who usurped God’s role (Lay 2016: 102). Arthur Marotti (2015: 157) further argued that More advocated spiritual freedom in her text, by following her “divine call or inner light”—i.e. the spiritual course that best suited her— and she called for resistance or “civil disobedience” to the superior when he refuses to accept the “inner light” of the practitioner of contemplation.

In the Confessions, More underlines the importance for spiritual directors to command, not by exercising their own power, but rather by acting as a conduit for the power of God: “What thou wouldst command, they would commend [command]” (Confessions 206). She urged those in positions of power to seek His honor and glory rather than their own: “what they did of themselves, they would accompt little profitable as to the aduancement of souls” (Confessions 206). More criticizes superiors when they usurp and abuse their power, and claims that if a spiritual director had a humble spirit and truly sought to accompany the soul to discern God’s will, he would not object to entrusting the soul to the care of another, even one inferior to him, for the chance another’s guidance might afford more benefit to that soul. More states:

and if *thou* shouldst perhaps let another (though their subiect) to see and discern what were fit in that case, or cases though he were but the last and lowest, and of the least esteeme in the Conuent, yet certainly such Superiors would not accompt it to derogate from their authority. (Confessions 206–207)

By referring to the Scriptures, More stresses the importance of “giuing [giving] that to God which is only Gods own, and to Ceasar that which is due to Ceasar [...]for both these obediences are necessary to make a true spiritual life” (Confessions 192). More continuously asks obedience (which she considered a virtue) to God. However, she also cautioned that it should not be interpreted as some

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<sup>80</sup> Bazzi, Malak and Plante, Kelly. “More and the Feminist Tradition.” In *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. Eds. Jaime Goodrich and Kelly Plante. <s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/>. Date accessed: [20 July 2021].

blind exterior submission to a male minister, but rather as an interior disposition to accomplish God's will through the guidance of a spiritual director. The consequences, she suggests, of not acting thus risks every sort of disorder, uneasiness, and rebellion. For example, she argues that "the sensual love, and friendship between the Superiors and their subjects would cease" when the superior "governs" the soul only in regard of God's will (Confessions 206–207). In More's understanding, "Powre [power] was giuen by God, for edification and not for distruction" and this edification consists principally in the "Superior accommodating him-self to the interior diuine [divine] call of his subject" (Apology 106).

According to More, Baker epitomizes "the good superior" because he did not tie her to himself, but guided her to find and to accomplish God's will. In the Apology, she writes: "This I haue thus affirmed becaus he who hath been my Maister (Father Baker), and Father in a spiritual life: and hath brought me into a course, which much satisfieth my soul, and conscience between me and God [...]" (8). More underlines here the personal satisfaction she gained from Baker's spiritual advice and in another passage, she describes affective prayer as the most appropriate course of prayer for her:

I found my heart grown (as I may say) as hard as a stone, and nothing could haue been able to haue mollified it; but by being put into a course of prayer; by which a soul tendeth towards God, and learneth of *him* the true lesson of *humbling* her-self. Which effect I finding by following Father Baker's plaine, simple, easy and sweet instructions [...].  
(Confessions 14)

Baker also taught More not to be "daunted with [...] sins" (Apology 24) and did not ask her to confess more than it was necessary to her spiritual progress, since all would turn to her good if she tended to God by prayer and renounce "al inordinate affections to created things" (Apology 24). He provided her with general instructions in contemplative life and underlined that the "diuine spirit" is "the proper Maister of the interior" (Apology 52) and God is "the only Teacher of the way of spirit" (Apology 53). The evening before More's death, it was reported that Baker was at Cambrai and More was asked if she wanted to meet him, but she replied: "*No, nor any man*" (Baker 2002: 323, italics in original). This was interpreted by Baker as the proof that she was so advanced in her spiritual life that she did not need the direction of any priest, not even that of her master in contemplative life.

More's writings reveal as astute an analysis, and as deep an awareness of the problems related to convent life and the issue of obedience to domineering men, as any religious woman of the early seventeenth century. She recognizes that discursive prayer procured her no benefits: "Now for my part I do profess I could neuer find good: by discourse" (Apology 31), thus she searched for help and

did not rest until she found in Baker's spiritual guidance a way that she felt offered the most appropriate path for her:

For liuing [living] in Religion (as I can speake by experience) if one be not in a right course between God and our soul: Ones nature growes much worse; then euer [ever] it would haue been, if they had liued in the word [world]. (Apology 13)

More acknowledged the diversity of everyone in spiritual matters: "For as we al [all] differ in face so do we differ in the manner of our exercises that are interior" (Apology 46) and she pursued what she felt was her way in contemplative life without letting anyone, male or female, in a position of authority deprive her of her comfort. She was determined to follow her interior call and divine inspiration, and looked for a personal relationship with God. From this derived all other religious duties and, above all, obedience to superiors.

#### **5.4 More's Mysticism**

I will argue that another way in which More showed agency in her religious life and writings was through her mysticism. By following the "way of love", as Baker and More called it—by following her "interior call"—she affirmed her personal way of uniting with God. The focus of the next paragraphs will be on the Confessions, as they contain religious meditations in which the author reflects and comments on her contemplative life.

Let us focus first on the title itself. The term "Confessions" recalls Saint Augustine's main work and More herself mentioned this author repeatedly in her text as a source of inspiration for her life and writings:

[...] my beloved father S. Augustin, whom thou hast giuen me in a particular maner, to be a help to me in doubts and feares, and an encouradgement by his books [...] and as a fire are all his words to inflame me to seek after and aspire to thy diuine loue [...].  
(Confessions 134)

It seems also worth noting that the medieval poet John Gower, whose reputation in the fifteenth century was on a par with that of his friend Geoffrey Chaucer, entitled one of his main works "Confessio Amantis" (The Lover's Confessions) published in 1390. The latter is a poem of eight books in which the main characters, Genius, the confessor figure, and Amans, the penitent, enact what seems to be a Church Penance Sacrament: in seven of the eight books Amans confesses a



different deadly sin to Genius and the latter tells a story to correct Amans from a selfish pursuit of sexual desire. However, some elements betray a context that is not exactly that of an ordinary confession: Amans (the literal meaning of which is “one who loves”) is heard by Genius, a priest of Venus, whose name refers to the “genial” side of the psyche. Moreover, the stories told by Genius are not drawn from penitential treatises, but rather taken from secular and classical sources—predominately Ovid’s erotic love poetry. Ultimately, Amans and Genius, representing passion and psyche respectively, are reconciled and Amans regains his full identity and reveals himself as “John Gower”.<sup>81</sup> Both Amans and More confess their sins to a spiritual director, who guides them to renounce inordinate affections for earthly pleasures to regain their freedom of spirit. Did Baker, by entitling More’s writings “*Confessiones Amantis*”, want to draw a parallel between Amans and Gertrude, and between himself and Genius? Investigating this issue further exceeds the scope of this research and there seems to be no clear evidence that either Baker or More were acquainted with Gower’s work, and that Baker deliberately wanted to refer to it. Nonetheless, the similarity of the titles remains noteworthy in the current context.

It is also important to consider the spiritual and mystical writings that More not only knew and read, but from which she also took inspiration for the Confessions. As already clearly established, the Augustinian influence was paramount, but Gertrude also listed other authors who were influential to both her spirituality and her writings, namely: “the Aeropagite, Hugh and Richard of St. Victor, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Ruysbroek, Suso, Tauler, St. Gertrude, St. Bridget, Hilton, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Gregory the Great, Benet of Canfield, John Climacus (Spiritual Ladder) and Catherine of Siena” (Latz 1997: 15). Moreover, the Confessions could be considered an elaboration of Thomas à Kempis’ “*Imitatio Christi*” (More 2009: xviii). Indeed, More referred to it more than once in her text:

Author of the following of Christ [...] whose words with great ioy I read [...] they contain the way in which a foole [soul] cannot ere, and without the practice of this, our soules lye open to all the snares of the Diuell [...]. (Confessions 42)

Blessed is that simplicity (saith my foremencioned author in his four book of the Following of Christ) that forsaketh the difficullt way of many questions. Those are his words in his said divine Booke, where he proveth the way of Love to be so easy, and secure, as I have before signified. (Confessions 55)

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<sup>81</sup> For a detailed account of the poem’s contents, see: *Greenblatt (2018: 364–65)*.

More argues that À Kempis' book guides the soul toward the "way of Love", which is simple, easy, and secure, and that offers protection for the soul from the deceiving strategies of the devil. Finally, other important spiritual references for her were: "Our most holy Father S. Benedict, our Mother S. Scholastica, as also S. Ioseph, S. Iohn, S. Thomas, and S. Gertrude, in whose hart thou didst delight to dwell" (Confessions 134).

More believed and acted "on the principle that contemplation is the normal means of approaching God in prayer for all Christians, not the exclusive privilege of a few specially gifted souls" (Norman 1976: 208). Although Baker, in "The Life of Trutha", places her progress into "stations" (Norman 1976: 206), "roughly corresponding to the traditional divisions into purgative, illuminative and mystical ways, Gertrude herself uses no such terms" (Norman 1976: 206). As we shall see in the next paragraphs, "to her only two things matter: faith and love" (Norman 1976: 206).

More "belonged to a tradition of mystical writers who believed in the value of the *via negativa*, a path to union with God through total self-abnegation and the emptying of the mind of set ideas and images" (More 2009: 13). Abnegation consists, as the *Imitation of Christ* teaches, not only in finding joy and fulfilment in God alone and in renouncing all earthly inordinate affections for creatures, but also for oneself. Baker himself described the spiritual path of abnegation in his *Secretum*:

ye [the] higher ye soul is Elevated from ye Bodily Senses, & abstracted from them & from ye body [...] ye lesse subiect is She to be Caryed away wth [with] ye inordinate passions & Affections of ye body and of Sensuality, out of wch [which] springeth ye cheif or only perill & Damage of our Soules. (Baker, *Secretum*, 20, cited in Van Hyning 2013: 149)

In More's understanding, abnegation means giving her heart, mind, body, and soul entirely to God, without retaining anything for herself or for other creatures, so that God could accomplish His will in her. Moreover, abnegation implies dying to oneself and to other created things because an inordinate affection for them would distance the soul from the Creator. This may seem difficult to grasp and possibly harsh to live. However, what More means, referring here to an entire mystic tradition, namely the Flemish and Rhineland traditions—which are in turn influenced by the women mystics Hadewijch, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Beatrijs of Nazareth (Scoular Datta 2002: 62, 63)—is not that human affection *per se* is wrong, but rather that it is an inordinate affection. In other words, a love that is not rooted in God or, worse, which substitutes God, and thus becomes an idol: "[...] For if the soul do willingly retain an affection to any such thing, she is at a stop, and can go no farther. For God must be sought and loued wholly, if we desire to arriue to Perfection" (Confessions 248).

In addition, More was instructed into the so-called apophatic tradition. In the early sixth century, Dionysius the Areopagite introduced the terms “apophatic” and “cataphatic” into Christian theology, which stem from the Hebrew scriptures and Greek philosophy. They mean, respectively, the use of negation and affirmation when talking about God (Louth 2012: 137). In his *Mystical Theology*, the Aeropagite contends that it is impossible to know what God is: He is unintelligible and inexpressible, as He transcends everything that exists. Therefore, any intellectual concept is inadequate in theology and the language of negation, or “apophatic”, offers the only possible means via which to talk about God because we can only come to understand what He is not (Jantzen 2000: 94).

In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Caroline Walker Bynum (1987) contends that women’s spirituality in the thirteenth and fourteenth century was primarily enacted through the body. She argues for a distinctively female somatic piety, characterized by a propensity for hyperbolic suffering and erotic mysticism. Furthermore, she noticed a prominence of eucharistic devotion, food ascetism, feeding miracles, and food images in female piety of the late medieval period. According to Bynum, women’s spirituality typically belongs to the cataphatic type, since they use “natural symbols and the material world to experience and express the divine” (Scouler Datta 2002: 51).

More’s mysticism, however, cannot be defined as purely sensory in nature as, for Bynum, it is based on the somatization of the mystical experience and/or on self-inflicted suffering; she did not experience any extraordinary bodily manifestation or “parapsychic phenomena”, such as “visions, voices, ecstasies, etc.” (Bruneau 1998: 16). The latter were discouraged in the apophatic tradition and medieval spiritual literature expressed caution on the subject. For example, Walter Hilton affirmed that these kinds of mystical phenomena could equally come from the devil, while the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* contended that they could often be the product of brain diseases (Jantzen 2000: 59). Indeed, Baker himself firmly discouraged visionary experiences. Scouler Datta (2002: 51) underlined how More’s spirituality has a more “apophatic” character since she stresses God’s unintelligibility and inexpressibility: “To speak with him it is impossible, the distance of place is so great [...]” (Confessions 101, 102). “My God, whom none can see and live [...]” (Confessions 103).

According to the apophatic tradition, God is a reality beyond any human intellectual category and the only way to approach Him is through a personal relationship. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* also contrasted reason and love when talking about God, saying that it is impossible to understand God, but He can be loved:

It is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think. Because he can certainly be loved, but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought. (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, VI, in Jantzen 2000: 95)

More followed Baker's contemplative path leading to a passive contemplation of God through simple affective prayer (Goodrich 2021: 75). She rejected intellectual forms of devotion, in favor of one based on feeling.<sup>82</sup> More practiced prayer of "sensible affection"—a type of prayer that involved her feelings, more than her understanding. In other words, she did not aim at knowing God through rationality or discourse, but rather hoped to experience him as a "spiritual lover" (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 3760). She writes: "Lett our harts [hearts] study nothing ells, but how to love thee [...] we cannot learn but by conversing with thee" (Confessions 38).

More suggests that prayer, rather than reading and studying, understood not only as a discourse, but also as an affective union with God, elevated her mind to an understanding of the divine mystery impossible to achieve by any other means: "[...] Thou art not to be seene in this life as thou art, yet, an humble soul is not ignorant of thee [...] by loue obtaineth the heavenly wisdom of thee [...]" (Confessions 82). She continued: "[...] Yea to shew thy power thou hast been pleased many times to bring a silly woman, louing thee, to that wisdom that no creature by wit or industry could attain to the same [...]" (Confessions 189).

Interestingly, in the above quotations, More uses the terms "humble soul" and "silly woman" to refer to herself. She again seems to wittingly use her religious language conventions as far as women's speaking is concerned to state exactly the opposite: she says that women are silly and can only access God by means of love, but at the same time she affirms that the relation of love with God greatly surpasses the rational knowledge of Him. More made numerous references to this subject, for example:

"Those that loue thee, and seek only to please thee, are those which haue a sight in part, of what in heaven we shall enioy cleerely for all eternity." (Confessions 90)

"O that I did truly love! For by love only my soul shall becom capable of vnderstanding truth." (Confessions 95)

"For one learneth more in Prayer of thee in one hower [hour], then all creatures in the world could teach." (Confessions 10)

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<sup>82</sup> Meyerhoff, Bailey. "More and Religious Verse." In Goodrich, Jaime & Plante, Kelly (eds.) *The Poetry of Gertrude More: Piety and Politics in a Benedictine Convent*. <s.wayne.edu/gertrudemore/>. Date accessed: [20 July 2021].

Amy Hollywood (2004) underlined the necessity to approach women's spirituality from a variety of perspectives, not just Bynum's embodied model. I contend that More combined apophatic mysticism and negative theology with the traditions of affective piety and "nuptial mysticism"—the latter originating from the Divine Office as well as from her own readings. For example, in the Confessions her prose is amorous, her register is highly emotive and sensual, like that used by a romantic lover (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 3965-4020), and her language echoes the Song of Songs.<sup>83</sup>

More calls God her "only beloved" (Confessions 4) and "only desire" (Confessions 16), and wishes to be united to Him forever by "a knott of Love" (Confessions 8). Her heart is consumed by this love for her Creator, as if by a "flame" (Confessions 13) and her heart sings "songs of Love to Him" (Confessions 16). Nothing in this world can satisfy her soul, but God who is her "only love, light, hope, comfort, refuge, delight, and whatsoever else can be desired, or imagined" (Confessions 16, 17). He is More's friend, comforter, and true lover, and More seeks solace with Him to find peace and to satisfy her unquiet heart:

"Let me be drowned, and swallowed vp in that of Diuine loue, in which my soul may swim for all eternity." (Confessions 126)

"Neuer was there euer such acquaintance, loue, and friendship, between any in this world, as there is between thy Goodnes and an humble soul." (Confessions 188)

The relationship with God is described by More as intimate and erotic, like that of a bride and bridegroom: "[...] faithfull soul, who seeketh nothing but to imitate her beloued, [...] to become an intimate, and inward friend of this our heavenly Bridegroom" (Confessions 80). What is also interesting about More's amorous language is the concept of "wounding" to describe her personal experience of God's love:

"[...] neither can they take any content, but hearing thy name, speaking to thee, and longing after thee, after thou hast wounded their soul with thy Divine Charity."  
(Confessions 30)

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<sup>83</sup> The Song of Songs (also Song of Solomon, Canticle of Canticles, or Canticles) is the most erotic book placed right at the heart of the Bible. Its author is unknown. Images taken from the Song of Songs often appear in texts from male and female mystics alike, as this book celebrates the erotic love between a bridegroom and his bride, who represent Christ and His church respectively, and in mystic union the soul is elevated to be united with God, as if in marriage.

“[...] and some times thou speakest to vs; so that it pearceth, and woundeth with desire of thee, the very bottome of our soules [...]” (Confessions 40, 41)

“O who wil giue me the wings of a Doue that I may fly into the open wounds of my beloued?” (Confessions 261)

Notable in the above quotations is that, on the one hand, it is “us” to have been wounded by the Divine Charity while, on the other hand, the “open wounds” are those of God, the beloved/bridegroom. Moreover, the image of the dove clearly resonates with the Song of Songs, in which the beloved (2:14; 5:2; 6:9)<sup>84</sup> and/or the eyes of the beloved (1:15; 4:1; 5:12)<sup>85</sup> are compared to this bird.

Laurence Lux-Sterritt (2017) argued that “English Benedictine mystics partook of a long-standing heritage and recounted similar sensations, using images comparable to those of the mystics whose works they read” (location no. 4008). “All of them expressed their annihilation in God’s love, their sense of being lost in love, penetrated by Christ and merging with Him” (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4024). Modern studies, among others those of Amy Hollywood (2002) and Elizabeth Petroff (1994), highlight the sensuality and eroticism of these mystical encounters with God. However, I agree with Lux-Sterritt (2017) when she argues that interpretations such as these do not sufficiently render the full complexity of the union with God: “As the brides of Christ sought to unite with their heavenly bridegroom, they were consumed by a desire which far transcended any human love: these were the spiritual affects of spiritual creatures” (location no. 4074). According to Lux-Sterritt, the confusion is caused by the limitations of human language as they can only refer to the language of earthly love to describe their spirituality, which was necessarily experienced through the body and its emotions (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 243). Therefore, the body from which nuns strove to free themselves or escape represented a hindrance to attaining spiritual perfection, but “could also be the very locus of the experience of divine love, and the opportunity for spiritual bliss” (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 244–45).

Another feature that characterizes More’s mystic language is the use of food imagery. God’s presence in her soul is a “heavenly repast” (Confessions 33) that “satiates” (Confessions 25) her heart. Moreover, God’s words are compared to honey: “The words of thy Royall Prophet [...] they are more sweet to a loving soul then the honny, or the honny combe” (Confessions 64). God’s presence thus becomes concrete and flesh-like in More’s words, like food and drink, and has the capacity to nourish the soul and to fortify it:

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<sup>84</sup> The Song of Songs < <https://biblescripture.net/Song.html>>. Date accessed: [9 September 2021].

<sup>85</sup> Ibidem.

“[...] let thy name [...] about all earthly things delight, [...] refresh me amidst the stormes of temptations which daily assault me.” (Confessions 88)

“Giue her to drink who withers away for want of thee the fountain of al sweetnes. I will power out my soul before thee [...].” (Confessions 111)

“[...] with the sweet dew of thy Grace refreshest them.” (Confessions 144)

Finally, being in God’s presence is compared to being invited to a dinner: “[...] tast of thy supper [...] Religion, which is the place where we may most abundantly tast and see, how sweet our Lord is [...]” (Confessions 176).

Food analogies are also employed in the Bible to describe eternal life, which is compared to a wedding banquet where we would unite forever to our Creator:

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet’ [...]. (Matthew 22: 1–14)

Moreover, Jesus compared Himself and His words to food: “[...] Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’ [...]” (John 6: 35).

In the dedicatory epistle of the *Spiritual Exercises* written by Francis Gascoigne to More’s sister, Bridget More, Gascoigne states: “the whole Book hath nothing in it almost but Scripture” (Confessions 4). As we have seen, in the *Confessions* More writes her meditations on the Office, thus the language of the Scripture necessarily pervades her text. However, although this imagery originated from the Sacred Texts and from the tradition of affective piety, in which More was well read, I would argue that she is not merely repeating models here, but rather takes an active role. Indeed, More could have taken the Bible’s emphasis on hyperbolic suffering and self-sacrifice, but she chose to focus on love and nourishment instead, living a testimony of her joy and satisfaction in following the way of affection. It could be argued that in doing so, More again expresses her agentic capacity through her religion. On the one hand, she uses the literary genres peculiar to the mystic

tradition, in this case the commentary on the Song of Songs and on Scriptures, and she infuses them with the contemplative teachings received by Baker and with Biblical language. On the other hand, she manipulates this language to stress her spiritual fulfilment in following a spiritual path based on love.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

Gertrude More received instruction into apophatic and negative theology predominantly via reading lists provided by Baker in the convent of Cambrai. Simultaneously, however, she combined this tradition with a personal devotion based on love and feeling, more than on doctrine or rationality.

Baker identified an inclination in More toward affective devotion and suggested this spiritual path to her. He also encouraged each nun under his supervision to follow the way best suited to them since no spiritual director, but God alone, could inspire a soul to find her proper spiritual way.

As this brief, specifically feminist analysis of More's writings has shown, she exercised her agentic capacity through, rather than despite, her religion. On the one hand, she called for spiritual independence from male superiors, not by subverting her religious conventions, but by wittingly conforming to them. More specifically, she used humble and submissive language in her texts, which contrasts with the strength of her anti-authoritarian arguments. On the other hand, she combined apophatic mysticism and negative theology with the traditions of affective piety and nuptial mysticism, in which she was guided by Baker—also through the reading lists he provided. More drew her affective language from the mystical tradition she read, and this language ultimately originated from the Scriptures and the Divine Office, which she recited every day with her community. However, More did not seem passive in reproducing it; to the contrary, she appropriated Biblical references to create her own mystic language based on love and nourishment, rather than on hyperbolic suffering and/or self-sacrifice.



## 6 “O my God, if I love thee not, I shall never know thee” (Constable 1649: 48): Dame Barbara Constable’s Original Writings from a Feminist Perspective on Religious Women’s Agency and Mysticism<sup>86</sup>

### 6.1 Introduction

In *Writing Habits: Historicism, Philosophy, and English Benedictine Convents, 1600–1800*, Jaime Goodrich (2021) issued a call for further research in early modern studies from a feminist philosophical perspective. This chapter attempts to answer her call by examining the religious writings of the seventeenth-century English Benedictine nun Barbara Constable via feminist theories on religious women’s agency and on mysticism.

I think the so-called “compliant models” of religious women’s agency proposed by Orit Avishai, Saba Mahmood, and Sarah Bracke, as outlined in previous chapters, can offer an interesting perspective from which to interpret the religious experience of Barbara Constable. I will contend that Constable, in a similar way to Gertrude More, expressed her agency through, rather than despite, her religion: on the one hand, she defended her spiritual autonomy and challenged blind obedience to male confessors (Goodrich 2021: 58) while, on the other hand, by building on her spiritual director’s contemplative life teachings, she affirmed her own mysticism.

Text analysis will be preceded by an introductory section on Constable’s life and her role at the Cambrai monastery.

### 6.2 Barbara Constable: The Scribe of Cambrai

Barbara Constable (1617–1684) was a Benedictine nun at the monastery of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai (France) during the English Civil Wars (1642–1651). Little is known about her life prior to entering the monastery (Wolfe 2007: 162). She belonged to the Constables of Everingham Park, an important recusant landowning family of the East Riding of Yorkshire. She was born in 1617 to Sir Philip Constable, first baronet of Everingham, and Anne Roper, daughter of Sir William Roper of Eltham, Kent (Wolfe 2007: 160). Two of her younger siblings, Catherine and Marmaduke, married, while another pair of siblings, Thomas and Philip, professed at St Gregory’s, Douai. The English Civil Wars and the Popish Plot controversy that followed brought many hardships

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<sup>86</sup> An abridged version of this chapter was presented at the H-WRBI Conference 2022 “WOMEN RELIGIOUS: LIVES AND LIFE STORIES”, June 2 & 3, 2022, UCD University Club, University College Dublin.

Author’s note: when possible, the quotations in this paper keep the original early modern English spelling. Translations into modern English have been provided in square brackets next to each word only when the original spelling could impede the understanding.

to the Constables, whose estate was sequestered and occupied. The family was forced to pay recusancy fines and a number were even imprisoned. Nevertheless, they remained devout Catholics (Wolfe 2007: 161).<sup>87</sup>

Constable's mother dedicated her daughter to the Virgin Mary as a child, as Constable (1649) writes in one of her most autobiographical manuscripts, *Gemitus Peccatorum or the Complaints of Sinners*: "O infinite goodness [...] my natural mother, when (I being newly born) she taking me into her arms, did dedicate me wholly unto thee; and thy most blessed mother [...]" (1). Unlike Gertrude More, who at first did not seem to feel a particular call to religious life, Constable felt a distinct and, in her own words, irresistible call from God at the age of nineteen, albeit facing an internal struggle to forsake the world:

"[...] thou o most infinite mercy [...] when I was nineteen years of age gave me so forcible a vocation to forsake the world, and all the vanities thereof, that I could no longer resist thee [...]" (*Gemitus* 1)

"[...] in vain do we strive against thy sweet providence, for though I loved many things in the world, & my friends & kindred so passionately, that I was even ready to die with the very thoughts of leaving them; & indeed I cannot express what a conflict I had for half a year before I could resolve to obey thy divine inspiration, & follow thee who so mercifully called me [...]" (*Gemitus* 1–2)

Constable entered the Cambrai monastery on 31 August 1638, age twenty-one—a century after the Dissolution and five years after More's death and Baker's departure, which both occurred in 1633. She entered Cambrai with Lucy and Mary Cary, the two youngest daughters of Elizabeth Cary, and Catherine (Justina) Gascoigne, a niece of the abbess Dame Catherine Gascoigne. She professed in 1640 and her confessor was Father Benedict Stapleton. She spent forty-six years as an English Benedictine nun at Cambrai, during which she wrote prolifically. Although the exact figure remains unclear, it is currently thought that Constable wrote at least eleven original works, transcribed twenty-five devotional texts, oversaw the convent's register of letters and instructions, and edited scribal copies of manuscripts, after having compared them to the original versions possessed by the monastery (Wolfe 2007: 158).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> For further details on the Constables of Everingham Park, see Wolfe (2007).

<sup>88</sup> Here the term "original" means texts that Constable did not transcribe or edit from other sources, but which she produced herself.

Baker and Constable never met in person. Constable entered Cambrai in 1638, well after Baker's departure in 1633. While, unlike More, Constable's relationship with Baker was "solely textual", she was known for her transcriptions of his works, and she followed his teachings on contemplative prayer (Lay 2011: 104). Throughout the 1640s and 1650s, Constable was the "primary transcriber" of Baker's treatises, some of which were transmitted to England and to other English Benedictine monasteries, although others did not survive the suppression of the religious houses by the French Republic in 1793 (Wolfe 2007: 165). Currently, there are twenty-three known transcriptions by Constable, seventeen of which are of works by Baker (Wolfe 2007: 166).

Unlike the other nuns at Cambrai and Paris, who rarely had an audience in mind when they recorded their reflections and prayers on loose papers, Constable always addressed her volumes to a precise readership, either within or beyond the walls of the abbey. This is reflected in the physical layouts of her manuscripts, which have title pages—written in red ink—prefaces to the readers, and dedicatory letters, which reveal the intended destination of the manuscripts. In addition, Constable usually signed her texts, adding the date of completion at the end (Wolfe 2007: 168). Thanks to her ability to read Latin, English, and French, Constable collected material for meditation and prayer from many devotional authors and organized them thematically in her texts—as had Baker for the Cambrai sisters (Wolfe 2007: 166).<sup>89</sup> Moreover, her commentary on the authors she cites is usually so integrated into the text that it is difficult to distinguish her voice from theirs (Wolfe 2007: 167). For this reason, Jenna Lay (2011) defined Constable's texts as a form of "*florilegium*"<sup>90</sup> (104).

Constable's original writings can be grouped into three categories, according to their addressees: those for her superiors (priests, monks, and nuns); those for Catholics who experience spiritual aridity; and those intended for laypeople needing basic texts for prayer and liturgy (Wolfe 2007: 168). Unlike More's writings, which were assembled by her spiritual director and edited for print publication by Father Francis Gascoigne, Constable's volumes can best be describe as "unmediated scribal publications", as they were never published (Lay 2011: 105).

As Jenna Lay (2011) wrote, the three manuscripts entitled *Advices for Confessors and Spirituall Directors* (1650), *Speculum Superiorum* (1650), and *Considerations for Preests* (1653)

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<sup>89</sup> As Heather Wolfe (2007) wrote, "the range of authors she cites is unexpectedly broad, from many different time periods, countries, and religious orders. Authors include St. Ambrose, St. Anthony, St. Augustine, St. Bede, St. Benedict, St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, St. Boniface, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Ciprian, St. Denis, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Gregory, St. Isidore of Damietta (i.e., Pelusium), St. Jerome, St. John the Apostle, St. John Chrysostom, St. Paul, John Gerson, and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers such as St. Francis de Sales, St. Francis Xavier, St. John of the Cross, Cardinal de Bérulle, St. Peter of Alcantara, the abbot of St. Cyran, the bishop of Grasse, the bishop of Lisieux, Cardinal Bellarmine, Pope Innocent, Brother John of St. Sampson, and Mr. Forest (Blessed John Forest)" (167).

<sup>90</sup> The term "florilegium" means a collection of extracts from other writings, or, in other words, an anthology.

“form a unique trilogy of instructions written by a single nun for her religious superiors” (100).<sup>91</sup> Respectively, the manuscripts address her confessor, Father Benedict Stapleton; Abbess Catherine Gascoigne; and, when he was about to become an ordained priest, her brother, Dom Augustine (Thomas) Constable. A recurrent theme in this trilogy for her superiors is the “divine nature of their jobs”, namely, the spiritual direction of souls, which “they should assume with great reluctance and humility” to avoid the risk of abusing their power and substituting their authority to God’s (Wolfe 2007: 168). Baker’s influence is particularly evident here, as he always stressed the importance of following one’s interior call and the primacy of the Holy Spirit in the direction of souls. As we will see below, what is striking about this trilogy is the “freedom” (Wolfe 2007: 170) Constable demonstrates in discussing “the flaws she perceived within the English Benedictine hierarchy”, the majority of whom were male (Wolfe 2007: 170).

The two volumes entitled *Gemitus Peccatorum or the Complaints of Sinners* (1649) and *The Second Part prosecuting the Excellency of Mental Prayer* (1657) address regulars and laypeople experiencing spiritual aridity or desolation—a problem that Constable also faced frequently in her contemplative life. In this regard, as a result of her own struggles, Constable felt that she “was in a special position to offer encouragement to others” (Wolfe 2007: 170). *The Second Part prosecuting the Excellency of Mental Prayer* is dedicated to Dom Joseph Martin, with whom she had “corresponded on the subject of desolation” (Wolfe 2007: 170) and about whom nothing is known other than he was on a mission in Somerset in 1665 together with another priest, Father Peter Salvin. *Gemitus Peccatorum* is more autobiographical nature.<sup>92</sup> Constable, speaking more reflectively about

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<sup>91</sup> At present [November 2021], the Colwich manuscripts are inaccessible, as they are temporarily stored at Stanbrook Abbey due to an intended merger of Colwich with Stanbrook, which has started during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, *Speculum Superiorum* could not be included in this research.

<sup>92</sup> Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob explained that “there are two versions of Barbara Constable’s manuscript ‘Gemitus Peccatorum’: one is at Stanbrook Abbey Archives and the other at Downside Abbey. They are in different hands and the Stanbrook one is definitely Dame Barbara Constable’s hand. The Downside text follows the Stanbrook one word for word [...] but is written in (probably) an early 19th century hand. The Stanbrook Version is bound in leather (probably in the late 18th or early 19th century. The Stanbrook manuscript was alienated from the Cambrai convent at some time before the French Revolution. Why and how? The mystery is yet unsolved but the existence of a second copy of the manuscript, at Downside Abbey suggests one answer. Inside front cover: ‘From an affectionate Brother to a still more affectionate Sister, Dame Mary Ann Rayment, 1809.’ The date is in a different hand and ink. Above the title: ‘This book was purchased of a bookseller in New Bond Street London in 1784’ in Fr Benedict Rayment’s hand. This date, of course, preceded the disruption of the French Revolution and the community’s expulsion which raises the intriguing questions; when and why did it leave Cambrai; where did it go and how did it turn up in London in 1784? It is not clear whether the date, 1809, refers to the date the manuscript was given to Mary Ann Rayment or, most unlikely, the date it was returned to the Cambrai nuns. The bound manuscript has been annotated first by Benedict Rayment and later by Dame Scholastica Gregson. Fr Benedict gives a short history of the nuns at Cambrai and speculates on the author’s identity. His comments show that he knew the Cambrai community had then moved to Salford. A mid-twentieth century commentary was also made on it by Dame Scholastica Hebin. The brother is identified as Fr Benedict Rayment, a secular priest who was based at Burton Constable, Yorkshire for many years, who was a regular benefactor and correspondent with the Cambrai/Salford nuns. His sister was Dame Mary Ann Rayment as a Benedictine nun at Brussels and then Winchester/East Bergholt/Haslemere [...]. The Downside Version is in a less good condition and not so well spaced and set out. The text continues in an almost continuous stream. It is less elaborate and does not use red ink or such ornate highlighting etc. It is inscribed in the inside cover as belonging to the library of St Mary’s Abbey, East Bergholt (the

her personal contemplative life experience, states that she had no other intention in writing it but to “help” herself “in time of necessity” (Constable 1649: 218). While this work has no specific addressee, Constable “predicts that it will be read by others” and she is concerned that they would not betray the nature of her book (Wolfe 2007: 170):

I most humbly desire that it may never fall into the hands of those who reading y<sup>ns</sup> [this?] out of curiosity know not how to glorify thee by them, but judge rashly and laugh and contemn things that are poor and simple though well meaning [...]. (Constable 1649: 218)

The final category of Constable’s original writings addresses laypeople needing basic texts for prayer and liturgy. The recipients thereof would have also included her recusant family members in England and it would have fallen to priests travelling to the mission in York to deliver them (Wolfe 2007: 170). With these texts, Constable fulfilled a “missionary role”, responding to a demand from Catholics in England for liturgical and devotional material (Wolfe 2007: 167). She dedicates the manuscript entitled *A Spiritual Treatise, conteininge some advise for seculars* (1663) to her eldest brother, Sir Marmaduke.<sup>93</sup> As the title suggests, this treatise provides instructions on how to live a perfect spiritual life—something attainable by both the religious and secular alike (Wolfe 2007: 171). Another manuscript, *A spirituall Incense Composed of diuers exercises of prayer* (1657) is the third (and last) part of three volumes dedicated to the practice of daily prayer and is addressed to Constable’s sister, Catherine Sheldon. It is accompanied by two further texts: *Masses for some principall festiuities of the yeare translated out of the Missall* and another book of prayers divided into six sections and drawn from devotional authors (Wolfe 2007: 171). Finally, *Considerations or Reflexions vpon the Rule of the most glorious father St Benedict* (1655) is dedicated to the founder of the Benedictine order, as the title itself suggests, and contains commentary, interwoven with references to authoritative authors, on several topics of the Benedictine Rule. As with *Gemitus Peccatorum*, this text also includes Constable’s personal reflections on her spiritual difficulties at Cambrai.

As Jenna Lay (2011) has demonstrated, Constable repeatedly employed the “modesty *topos*” in her original collections, denying herself any agency with regard to instructing and teaching, and

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community Mary Ann Rayment belonged to). This is the Benedictine community that was founded at Brussels, when it closed its library and archives were sent to Downside Abbey. My theory is that the manuscript at Stanbrook is Barbara Constable’s original text and the manuscript at Downside is a copy made from it for the community at Winchester (later East Bergholt) when they gave the original manuscript back to the Stanbrook community (possibly in 1809). [...]” From: personal correspondence (email) with Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob, dated 6 July 2022.

<sup>93</sup> This manuscript was not at the East Riding Archives or the Hull History Center when I checked in 2020, and at present [November 2021] it remains unlocated. For this reason, *A Spiritual Treatise* could not be included in this research.

presenting her material merely as “little” and “poore” thoughts (107). However, she often accompanied short extracts with extensive commentaries in which she expressed her opinions on several topics, “from the minutiae of the relationship between a confessor and his charges to the political and religious import of a priest’s participation in the English mission” (Lay 2011: 100). Albeit without subverting any gender and clerical hierarchy, Constable openly intervened in many issues, for instance in the debate over authority and obedience to superiors, who played such a central role in the lives of English women religious following the Reformation (Lay 2011: 111).

### 6.3 Obedience to Superiors

As stated above, Constable neither wanted, nor indeed proposed, any subversion of the male clerical hierarchy, nor did she rebel against her religious vows. Rather, her aim was to love and unite with God through Benedictine Rule and her community life. Constable did, however, express her ideas concerning obedience to superiors, the relationship with spiritual directors and, more generally, her spiritual life. She did so via a witty use of what Alison Weber (2016) called “stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour” (48), namely, a self-depreciatory language and a “low and plain style” (Goodrich 2019: 599).

In *Aduises For Confessors & Spirituall Directors*, drawing from the lives and works of diverse holy persons (among whom, interestingly, there is also a lay man, Seneca), Constable engages with the issue of authority in the spiritual direction of souls.<sup>94</sup> As did More before her, Constable does not deny male religious authority *per se*, but she uses the *topos* of the “poor little woman” (Bynum 1987: 292) to express anti-authoritarian ideas. In *Aduises*, she repeatedly affirms that she has no pretense whatsoever to teach or to instruct with her manuscript: “I have any intention herrebie to teach you anything” (2), but just to report the teachings and sayings of holy people, who are “unquestionable both in their lives and writings” (7).

Constable opens her reflections in *Aduises* by stating that the spiritual direction of a soul is “a weighty affair” (8), since “what is fitte & proper for one may be very preiudiciall to another” (282). Therefore the spiritual guide should not “meddle with others without a particular vocation from god” (14). She also affirms that Christ is the chief spiritual director and religious guides are his “viceregens” (217) and should absent themselves for the spirit of God to work in souls (221):

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<sup>94</sup> Among the authoritative persons who Constable mentions in her manuscript there are the following: Cacciaguerra; holy Abbot of St. Cyran; St. Francis Xavier; Cardinal Peter Berule; Br. Giles; St. Francis; St. Teresa; Sr. Jane of St. Saviour; Mr. Bardon (priest); St. Patroclus; Bishop of Geneva; Rodriguez the Jesuit; St. Austine; St. Ignatius; St. Jerome; St. Ephrem; St. Gregory; Pope Nicholas; St. Bernard; Thomas de Kempis; St. Cyprian; St. Basile; Fa. Balthazar Alvares; St. John of the Cross; and the abbess Marguerite de Sainte-Gertrude d’Arbouze.

[...] it is most necessarie for those that guide soules to leade them by the waies of god & not by their owne, according to the light of the holy ghost, & not according to the obscure light of humane understanding [...] this is a fault which I haue knowne in many of those who guide soules, that they would make them goe by their owne waies [...]. (222–24)

The influence of Augustine Baker on Constable is evident here, as he had always stressed observance to the interior call, or divine inspiration, on the part of his disciples, and stated that spiritual directors and confessors should only help discern such a call or inspiration and not substitute themselves to God. Constable then goes as far as imagining having to govern the soul of St. Paul: “if I had as greate a saint as St. Paule to gouverne” (366) and having “the charge of all the soules of the world” (361). She underlines the importance of reservedness and humility in the relationship with the penitent: “they should neuer know the opinion that I had of them nor no bodie else” (361). Further qualities a spiritual guide should have, according to Constable, are patience and charity. In the context of charity, Constable states it should be both “paternall & maternall”, meaning strong and compassionate at the same time (259–61).

In the above quotations, it is interesting to note how Constable places herself vicariously in a role that could be only obtained by men, and she discusses this role from the perspective of a mixture of male and female qualities. In other words, she engenders the discussion of spiritual direction. The role gender plays in the field of spiritual direction resonates further in the second part of *Advises*, which deals with the issue of women’s spiritual direction in monasteries. Constable contends that women are “scrupulous, curious and tedious” (297–98): they are “verie easie to be deceaued” by extraordinary phenomena, such as visions and revelations, which are to be discouraged (360). Here she does not hide the stereotypes and commonly held beliefs of her time regarding the weaker nature of women’s bodies and minds, which are also to be found in Baker’s teachings. At the same time, however, she bitterly criticizes those men who abuse their power to impose their own will on women to make them go their own way and not God’s:

to heare his superior is to heare god, when he commands nothinge that is euill or against his rule [...] for then indeed if he command any thinge against that you are not to heare him, but to follow your rule [...]. (402–403)

Here, Constable is saying that the authority of the spiritual guide cannot surpass God’s teachings and if the spiritual director commands something that is in contrast with them, the penitent has the right to disobey. In other words, like More, she stresses the importance of disobedience to superiors when

they command in their own power rather than God's. Although Constable declares she has no intention to teach or to instruct, wishing instead via her manuscript to collect her thoughts and the sayings of holy people on the matter of the spiritual direction of souls, as Jenna Lay (2011), Heather Wolfe (2007), and Genelle Gertz (2013) underlined, this is a strategy Constable used to express her ideas.

Another example of this strategy can be found on page 394 of *Aduises*, when Constable, commenting on the spiritual direction of women in monasteries, references a woman, namely Abbess Marguerite de Sainte-Gertrude d'Arbouze, as she wrote "many excellent things concerning these matters" (394). D'Arbouze was the abbess of Val-de-Grâce in Paris and a friend of Anne of Austria, the Queen Regent (Gertz 2013: 131). Constable relates how d'Arbouze contented that male confessors should teach the religious under their guidance to firstly confide and depend on the abbess for both spiritual and temporal matters, and she complained "of those confessors that will any way infringe the Abbess Authority over the religious saieinge" (395). This, d'Arbouze continued, is "the cause of all the dissensions and differences that are in monasteries, for while the Abbess pulls one way & the confessor another the poore religious [...] stand confounded [...]" (395). It is here that Constable adds her comment to d'Arbouze's ideas:

I haue sufficientlie experienced the sad effects of the confessors hauinge too much power, & could & would say much of this subject were it not to make my treatise tedious & ungratefull: & therefore I will proceed to cite more of this holy womans word [...]. (396)

This is a clear example of the manner in which Constable uses the thoughts of authoritative figures as a vehicle for her own, in this instance, those of Abbess d'Arbouze. It seems interesting that she refers to a woman in a position of power, and she "envisions that the male confessor becomes subordinate to the abbess and accepts her authority over the community's spiritual life" (Gertz 2013: 131). In *Aduises*, Constable is not denying the role of the male spiritual guide, as she says all this must be done to maintain order in the convent and to avoid stealing the father's time, which he could better use for prayer and meditation (399–400). However, Constable asserts, he should be consulted only out of real necessity for "god hauinge established Abbesses for their superiors, [...] would neuer faile to inspire them with all that should be necessarie for the aduise of their subiects" (401). I would argue that Constable seems to empower d'Arbouze here by contending that she is already replenished with the grace of God to be able to guide the women religious under her authority in all everyday issues. The male spiritual guide here thus acquires a supportive role.



In another volume of advice for superiors, *Considerations for Preests*, Constable opens by saying that she has united collections by authoritative people together with some “little poor thoughts” of her own (1). The above examples reveal a woman religious suggesting how a priest might best lead a pious life. Constable is again placing herself, albeit indirectly, in a role that could be only obtained by men. Sometimes her tone is even critical: “what a deplorable thinge it is to see nowadays none more ingaged in distractive imployments and secular businesses then Preests who yet very often have no obligation or necessitie to it [...]” (7); and “[...] they confide not in god, but rather in their own care and industries [...]” (8).

In the fourth part of the manuscript *For Missioners*, Constable stresses the importance for male ministers of God to have “a true vocation to the mission” (213) and says, including herself here, that “we often think we seek the glorie of God when indeed we seek but our own, we think we carrie others to him but we tie them oftner to ourselves [...]” (231). Constable makes a distinction here between those superiors who guide the souls under their supervision to discern and to accomplish God’s will, and those who tie them to themselves instead, in doing so, limiting the free will of the penitent. This resonates with More, who also criticized her superiors in this regard, contrasting them with Baker, who was able to guide souls to accomplish God’s will rather than his own.

In *The Second part prosecuting the Excellency of M: Prayer*, Constable grounds her reasoning on the prejudices of her time regarding women, who are, she writes, “more easie to be deceived” and thus necessitate a confessor or spiritual father (335–36). However, she also invites laypeople and regulars to “rely not upon him but upon god, above all creatures, never releing upon any director or others more than upon god” (353). In these quotations, the strategy Constable uses to express her voice again becomes visible: so as not to sound too controversial, she repeats the ideas of her time regarding women’s inferiority. Constable makes no attempt to openly subvert male clerical hierarchies, yet at the same time, she defends the primacy of the interior call of women above any male earthly authority.

The same concept was expressed two years earlier in *Considerations or Reflexions vpon the Rule of the most glorious father St Benedict*, in which Constable, again using the device of commenting on holy and authoritative people’s sayings, writes that “the best method for me was to tie my selfe to none but to giue full libertie to my soule to follow its own dictamen” (471). Of interest here is the manner in which Constable defends the “full liberty of her soul” in the face of earthly authorities. Although Constable does not deny the necessity and the importance of spiritual direction *per se*, she states very clearly that her “interior call”, as Baker calls it, takes priority over all other spiritual advice coming from the outside.

## 6.4 Constable's mysticism

I will argue that another way in which Constable showed agency in her religious life was by means of her mysticism, or, in other words, her personal contemplative way of uniting with God. To analyze Constable's mysticism, we will focus on her most autobiographical manuscript: *Gemitus Peccatorum or the Complaints of Sinners* (1649; hereafter *Gemitus*). The text exists in two copies: Constable's holograph version (Stanbrook Abbey) and an eighteenth-century transcription of the Stanbrook MS (Downside Abbey, MS 82143). The version I will refer to in this chapter is the Downside copy.

*Gemitus* is defined in its foreword as a collection of "sentimental complaints", wherein Constable "details the state of her soul, with reference to the effects of certain feast days", such as Christmas, Epiphany, the feast of Circumcision, of the Sacred Name of Jesus, etc.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, she quotes passages in Latin from the Office, and comments on the difficulties she faces in her spiritual life. She declares that her intention in writing is to help herself in moments of aridity and confusion, and calls her reflections "poor simple and sensible devotions" (139). Constable also defines herself as "miserable" and a "simple contemptible worm" (146). At the same time, however, as we will see in the following section, she appropriates Biblical language and the genre of the commentary to the Scriptures, manipulating them creatively to build her own personal contemplative path based on love. I contend this represents yet another way in which Constable expresses her agency through her religion.

Constable's mysticism is grounded in Baker's spirituality—as analyzed in detail in previous chapters. Here we will first recap its main features and explore Constable's understanding of them, before delving into her contemplative path. I have identified four central aspects of Baker's spirituality and will discuss them in the following paragraphs, namely: abnegation, prayer, reading, and contemplation.

Constable's mystical practice, like More's, can be defined as a "*via negativa*"—in other words, "a path to union with God by way of total self-abnegation" (Scouler Datta 2002: 62–63). Abnegation involves finding joy and fulfilment in God only, and in renouncing all earthly inordinate affections for creatures, things, and for oneself: "solid perfection consists [...] in true abnegation [...], that is leavng and renouncing herself and her own desires in all things" (Constable 1657b: 497). By emptying oneself, it is possible to be filled with God's presence and enclosure becomes an external sign of this internal renunciation of the world's pleasures and affections to be totally united with God. To describe this principle, Constable uses the verb "dying": "O when will that happy hour come, that I shall die to all things, and only be sensible of thee [...]" (Constable 1649: 72) and she asks to be

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<sup>95</sup> From: personal correspondence (email) with Jaime Goodrich, dated: 25 February 2021.

replenished with God only as he is her “only true delight which never changes” (Constable 1649: 133).

In this context, prayer should be the prime exercise of people called into religion. At Cambrai, during non-fasting days, nuns observed eight hours of the Divine Office and two Masses (Wolfe 2007: 172). Moreover, they should observe two half-hours of personal prayer a day. Baker never imposed a particular kind of prayer, but rather let each nun find the type of spiritual exercise that best suited her (Baker 2002: xxx). The kind of prayer that he found particularly useful for women of contemplative orders was the so-called “prayer of sensible affection” (Baker 2002: xxxviii). He encouraged the nuns to employ “personalized forms of prayer such as spontaneous affective aspirations (or short ejaculatory prayers) in order to reach a state of passive contemplation of God” (Goodrich 2019: 606). In the preface to the reader of *A spirituall Incense Composed of diuers exercises of prayer: The 3d Part*, Constable defines affective prayer as “amorous colloquies between God and a soul” and “brief and amorous sentences like sparkles of fire” which “inflame a soul but cause no tediousness nor tire dedication” (Constable 1657a: “The Preface to the Reader”). Moreover, in *Considerations or Reflexions vpon the Rule of the most glorious father St Benedict*, she writes: “this pure breefe prayer is a continuall eleuation of the mind to god by breefe & amorous aspirings & longeing of the soule after god, & not any vocall or meditatiue prayer” (318). Unlike forms of rote prayer—such as vocal or discursive— affective prayer does not use the repetition of words or formulas, but rather occurs as a spontaneous, continuously flowing dialogue of love between the soul and God.<sup>96</sup>

A further central theme, both in Baker’s teachings and in Constable’s spirituality, was spiritual reading, which was seen as preparatory for active contemplation and, albeit only for a few, passive contemplation as mystic union. It is important to remember that the reading material Baker suggested to the Cambrai nuns were religious texts and he established a veritable atelier there, providing numerous spiritual books that the nuns could use for meditation and prayer. The nuns read works by “medieval mystical writers such as Blosius, Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Rolle of Hampole, Suso, Tauler, and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*” as well as “contemporary writers such as Barbanson (1581–1632), Benet of Canfield (1562–1611), and St. John of the Cross” (Wolfe 2007: 159). Yet, Baker also closely monitored what the nuns read and imposed a strict discipline on the practice, as it was believed women had a weaker nature and too much reading could cause them damage (Wolfe 2004: 141). Reading and learning, albeit dependent on prayer and appropriate direction, are pivotal in Constable’s life, both before and after her monastic vows, as she herself testifies in *The Second Part prosecuting the Excellency of Mental Prayer*:

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<sup>96</sup> As did Gertrude More, Barbara Constable also mentioned Avila several times in her writings.

I cannot but attribute much of my good (if i haue any in me) to the loue i haue alwaies had euen from my infancie to readinge, & i haue allwaies lookt vpon it as a great gift of god, & one of the prime meanes which he hath vsed to keepe me in the state of saluation. (7–9)

For Constable, reading presents no impediment to prayer or spiritual recollection, so long as it is done, not out of curiosity, pride, or as a diversion (i.e. to kill time). Rather, when reading is practiced with moderation and the hours of daily prayer are respected, it acquires great value and plays an important role in contemplation, since it provides content for recollection, both for the mind and for the heart (Constable 1653: 171, 192). In this sense, reading, Constable says, is a sort of “continuance of prayer” (Constable 1657b: 10), which also helps to avoid distractions and idleness—problems she frequently faced in her spiritual life. In *Considerations or Reflexions vpon the Rule of the most glorious father St Benedict*, she writes:

[...] god speakes by no externall meanes more than by reading & it has allwaies seemed more efficacious to me then sermons which is more apt [...] to goe in at one eare & out at another, but serious readinge penetrates to the verie bottome of the hart & workes great effects... (Constable 1655: 190–92)

Constable argues that words she hears are volatile and easily lost, whereas those she reads linger in both her mind and heart. Thus, they help recollection as they orientate her mind and heart toward God.

As previously stated, reading was considered preparatory for active contemplation and, if only for a few, for passive contemplation as mystic union. As the term itself suggests, active contemplation is reached through “labour and industrie” and it is “gotten”, while passive contemplation is “infused”, meaning it is a gift of God to the soul, which welcomes it (Constable 1657b: 308). According to Constable, “the most noble and excellent degree of contemplation” is the intellectual, “which is made immediately in the understanding without aide of the senses or phansie” (Constable 1657b: 503). She affirms that the intellectual form of contemplation is the most perfect one, because it transcends both the senses and the imagination to reach unity with God in the understanding. Moreover, this last form of contemplation “makes us know divine things but obscurely” (Constable 1657b: 503), in contrast to the clear vision of God, which is to be achieved in the afterlife. The adverb “obscurely” seems a direct refence to *The Cloud of Unknowing* by Dionysius the Areopagite, a medieval author of the early sixth century, who was well known to Constable and who distinguished two spiritual

approaches: the apophatic and the cataphatic. In his *Mystical Theology*, the Aeropagite contends that it is impossible to know what God is, as He is unintelligible and inexpressible, and transcends everything that exists. Therefore, according to the Aeropagite, any intellectual concept is inadequate in theology and the language of negation, or “apophatic”, offers the only possible means via which to talk about God because we can only come to understand what He is not (Jantzen 2000: 94).

According to Caroline Walker Bynum, medieval women’s spirituality typically belongs to the cataphatic type, since they use “natural symbols and the material world to experience and express the divine” (Scoular Datta 2002: 51). She argued for a distinctively female somatic piety, one characterized by a propensity for hyperbolic suffering and erotic mysticism. However, Marie-Florine Bruneau (1998: 10) questioned Bynum’s idea that somatic piety was a natural disposition of women and a source of empowerment. In addition, Amy Hollywood (2004) proposed a variety of perspectives from which to approach women’s spirituality, not just the embodied model. Hollywood (2004), for example, revealed a rather speculative and anti-visionary tradition among the thirteenth-century Beguines.

As far as Constable is concerned, her mysticism cannot be defined as purely sensory in the sense Bynum understood it—based on the somatization of the mystical experience and/or on self-inflicted suffering—as Constable did not experience any extraordinary bodily manifestation such as visions or ecstasies. The latter were discouraged in the apophatic tradition and medieval spiritual authors, whom Constable knew and read, were cautious about them. Walter Hilton, for example, affirmed that these kinds of mystical phenomena could come from the devil and the Aeropagite contended that they could often be the product of brain diseases (Jantzen 2000: 59). As detailed in earlier chapters, Father Augustine Baker also firmly discouraged visionary experiences. Constable’s spirituality, like More’s, has a more apophatic character instead, as she says the most perfect degree of contemplation transcends the imagination, and the senses and the language of negation is the only possible way to talk about God as He is unknowable and inscrutable. According to the apophatic tradition, the only way to approach God is through total self-abnegation and the emptying of the mind of any set ideas and images in order to be replenished by His presence. “God is a spirit”, Constable writes, “and therefore must be adored in spirit” (Constable 1649: 141). She wishes to “die to all things and only be sensible of” God (Constable 1649: 72), further writing that He is an “abyss” (Constable 1649: 17) and is “above all things” (Constable 1649: 30). Images are thus “a great hindrance” and “weights tugging us down from” fully enjoying Him (Constable 1649: 26):

O how happy are they (my God) that know no body nor any thing but thee, they are not distracted with images, which are so great an impediment to the purely contemplating of thee, in whose contemplation consists our eternal felicity! (Constable 1649: 181–82)

In other words, God is the only one who can “satisfy” and “sate” Constable’s soul, while all other things are a “great distraction”, an “impediment” (Constable 1649: 76), and they “cause disturbance” (Constable 1649: 90). Therefore, she wishes to become “senseless” to them (Constable 1649: 78). This is the so-called “*via negativa*” (More 2009: 13) spoken of above: “If we desire to love God”, Constable writes, “we must hate ourselves, for nothing hinders us so much as that, if we would be conformed to God’s will in all, we must utterly renounce our will in all” (Constable 1649: 119).

In light of the above, I argue that the first way in which Constable expressed her agency through her mysticism was by combining the apophatic tradition and negative theology with an affective devotion. In *Gemitus*, Constable defines the monastery as “the school of love” (142) and she reflects on her contemplative life path based on simple affective prayer: “there is no security in loving any thing but thee my God, and all true happiness consists in loving and serving thee” (139). She then continues by saying that there is nothing

more grievous to a soul whom thou hast taught the way of love, then to hear that it is a dangerous way, and that we simple women are like to fall into errors by following that way, verily it is a strange thing to hear men that pretends [sic] to be spiritual, say so... (139)

Constable affirms that some spiritual men consider the way of love potentially erroneous and dangerous, again refers to “simple women”. To contrast this, Constable speaks of the security and happiness she personally experienced by following this path: “I have tasted and do plainly perceive that it is not so, but contrariwise that it is the most secure sweet, and happy way in the world” (139). In another passage in the manuscript, she contrasts the path of love with that based only on doctrine and knowledge: “thou [...] shalt ask us how much we have loved, not how much we have studied, read or written, many have written great volumes which are now full deep in hell, he doth much who loves much” (155). In Constable’s understanding, love seems to prevail on erudition and offers a secure path that leads to Heaven. Thus, it acquires a great importance and is superior to knowledge and doctrine—qualities typically associated with male devotional practices. This is another example of Constable using language conventions commonly associated with women to claim the opposite: she calls women “poor and simple”, but thanks to their affective spirituality, they can come closer to God.

In *Gemitus*, Constable also laments the idleness and distractions in her spiritual life and admits her inconstancy in loving God. She affirms that she came into religion to serve God perfectly, but she always experiences deficiencies and incapacity in corresponding to His love: “I know not what to do, nor which way to turn, there is so much impurity in all my actions; I am weakness itself in sining and offending, and no sooner an occasion presents itself, than I do fall” (194). Sometimes she even wishes to cease living to stop offending Him and reach perfection: “O how long shall I here be banished in this miserable world where I do nothing but daily offend thee? O when shall I be dissolved and be with thee?” (94).

Constable declares that her intention in writing *Gemitus* was to help herself in moments of aridity and confusion, and she calls her reflections “poor simple and sensible devotions” (139). She also defines herself as “miserable”—a “simple contemptible worm” (146). In the previous section, in which I examined the theme of obedience to superiors, I also pointed out how Constable, albeit denying any intention to teach and to instruct with her books, intervened in the relationship between male superiors and those they command. In doing so, she also expressed her opinions about spiritual direction, placing herself in a role that could only be obtained by men. In reflecting and commenting on her contemplative life, she now seems to disqualify herself again. We now examine how she appropriates commentary on Scriptures and Biblical language, manipulating them creatively to affirm her own affective spiritual path—yet another way in which she expressed her agency through her mysticism.

In *Gemitus*, Constable used erotic language and drew from the traditions of “nuptial mysticism”, which originated from the Divine Office as well as from her readings. For Constable, God is “all love, all joy, all good, all sweetness, and all happiness” (5). She calls Him her “refuge which I fly securely to, upon all occasions” (24) and her “physician to who, being sick or wounded, I recur to [...]” (24). God is “her only true friend and beloved” (113), the “bridegroom of her soul” (129, 134), “the most beautiful amongst the sons of men” (134), and the king of her heart (6). Moreover, her heart is described as a “pleasant garden” where she invites her beloved to come: “*Veni, veni dilecti mi, veni in hortum meum*” [Come, come my beloved, come into my garden] (6). We find here again erotic language that explicitly draws from the Biblical Song of Songs, which proclaims the love between a bride and her bridegroom, who search for each other continuously to be eternally united. The bridegroom refers to the bride as a “garden closed” and a “fountain sealed”: “A locked up garden is my sister, my bride; a locked up spring, a sealed fountain” (4:12)<sup>97</sup>. In these metaphors, we see similarities to those used by Constable in *Gemitus*, whose declaration of love for God resembles that of two earthly lovers:

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<sup>97</sup> The Song of Songs < <https://biblescripture.net/Song.html>>. Date accessed: [2 December 2021].

O truly amiable and truly loving [...] thee I desire, thee I long for, for thee I languish hourly, when shall I sincerely love thee and by loving thee truly enjoy thee? [...] for thee it hath most willingly forsaken all things, yea and will endeavour to forsake all affections, that so it may be more pure for thee. O most loving Lord how happy am I in thee, and how unhappy out of thee. Nothing do I desire for time and eternity but thyself alone my God [...]. (134)

Constable also compares her love for God to a “sea of goodness” (76), where she “will throw” herself and “will forever drown” (103). Moreover, she asks God to “wound” her heart “with those sweet darts of love” (94) and to “wholly possess my soul which thou hast thus wounded” (101). In these quotations it is interesting to note the same wounding imagery we already found in More’s Confessions. God’s love is compared here to “sweet darts”, which “wound the heart” of Constable to transform her into love.

Another image Constable uses in *Gemitus* to describe her love for God is the fire, which inflames her soul: “My heart is all on fire with thy love” (15); “O love, love, love, either let me love or not live, how long shall I burn with this great desire, and not be satisfied?” (67). We notice how the metaphors Constable uses to describe her love for God are explicitly concrete and flesh-like. She even seeks recourse in the imagery of food and drink when referring to the Eucharistic experience: “feed us daily with thy most precious body & blood”, “celestial food”, “bread of angels” (23). According to the Catholic faith, the Eucharist is a “nuptial gift” (West 2008: 86), a moment when we eat the body of Christ and become one with Him. Therefore, the unity with God to which we aspire in the afterlife could already be enjoyed on earth, through the “nourishment” Christ offers in the Eucharistic sacrament (West 2008: 86).

God’s words in the Gospel, and His body and blood offered for us in the Eucharistic sacrament, are described by Constable in *Gemitus* as “sweet streams of living water” (23) and a “celestial fountain” (36), with which she wishes to be “inebriated” (78) as God is “the only satiety” of her soul (31). Moreover, God’s words are compared to a specific food, namely honey: “O my God, how sweet are thy words to my poor dejected soul they are more sweet than honey or the honey comb, they give life to my soul being almost dead with sin...” (125)— an image we also encounter in More’s language of love. It is worth remembering that honey, together with milk, are two examples of “Biblical food”, as they can be found for example in Exodus:



So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. (Ex. 3:8)<sup>98</sup>

In addition, food analogies are also employed throughout the Bible to describe eternal life, which is compared to a wedding banquet: “Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son” (Matthew 22: 1–14).<sup>99</sup> Jesus himself compared his person and his words to food: “[...] Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’ [...]” (John 6:35).<sup>100</sup>

As previously argued, the use of erotic language and nuptial mysticism were not exclusively female traditions in medieval and early modern Catholic mysticism. Rather, such references appear frequently in work from the thirteenth century in Rhineland and the Low Countries, especially among Dominican nuns influenced by Eckhart and his followers, Tauler and Suso (Jantzen 2000: 64). Spiritual references such as these were well known to Constable. Indeed, as Laurence Lux-Sterritt (2017) argues: “English Benedictine mystics partook of a long-standing heritage and recounted similar sensations, using images comparable to those of the mystics whose works they read” (location no. 4008). “All of them expressed their annihilation in God’s love, their sense of being lost in love, penetrated by Christ and merging with Him” (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4024).

Although this erotic imagery originated from the Scriptures and from the tradition of affective piety in which Constable was instructed and well-read, I would argue that she is not merely repeating models here. Rather, she adopts an active role, selecting which Biblical words best correspond to her personal experience: she could have taken from the Sacred text an emphasis on hyperbolic suffering, or on blood and self-sacrifice, but she chooses to focus on love and nourishment instead, ultimately living a testimony of joy and satisfaction in following the way of affection. I argue this is the second way in which Constable expressed her agency through her mysticism.

## 6.5 Conclusion

As this analysis of Constable’s extant original writings from a feminist philosophical perspective has demonstrated, her agentic capacity was exercised through, rather than despite, her religion. On the one hand, she defended her spiritual autonomy and challenged the authority of male confessors

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<sup>98</sup> Bible Gateway < <https://www.biblegateway.com/>> Date accessed: [2 December 2021].

<sup>99</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem.

(Goodrich 2021: 58). However, she did this, not by subverting male clerical hierarchies, but by wittingly “conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour” (Weber 2013: 48). More specifically, she used the *topos* of the “poor little woman” (Bynum 1987: 292) and references well-known medieval contemporary spiritual authors, arguing that she was only adding her “poor” comments to theirs. Yet, despite her self-deprecating stance, Constable’s interventions were broad and detailed in terms of topic, and went well beyond her role of choir nun at Cambrai.

On the other hand, she expressed her agency through her mysticism, first, by combining affective piety with apophatic tradition and negative theology; and second, through an active and creative use of Biblical language and imagery to build her own personal contemplative path based on love. Constable deliberately chose Baker’s contemplative path, leading to a passive contemplation of God through simple affective prayer (Goodrich 2021: 75). She was also instructed in the tradition of affective piety and nuptial mysticism, creatively manipulating them by choosing to focus on love and nourishment, rather than on pain and self-sacrifice.

## 7 Catherine Gascoigne's *Account of Her Own Prayer*<sup>101</sup>: A Close Reading from a Feminist Perspective on Religious Women's Agency<sup>102</sup>

### 7.1 Introduction

At the request of the General Chapter of the English Benedictine Congregation, Catherine Gascoigne (1601–1676) wrote an account in which she offered her own description of prayer. *Account of Her Own Prayer* was written to defend Fr Augustine Baker's spiritual practices. Gascoigne's account, all of Baker's contemplative manuscripts, and Gertrude More's Apology were presented to the General Chapter in 1633—a process during which More suddenly died of smallpox. In response to the *Account of Her Own prayer*, the Benedictine Congregation's Chapter told Gascoigne: “Goe on couragiously, you have choosen the best way: we beseech Almighty God to accomplish that union which your hart desireth”.<sup>103</sup> However, in 1655, Gascoigne would again have to resist a review of Baker's contemplative manuscripts by the then president of the Benedictine Congregation, Claude White. On this occasion, however, Gascoigne orchestrated a plan to withhold the manuscripts and White died soon later, and thus the polemic was silenced. On her deathbed in 1675, Gascoigne appealed to the then President of the Congregation, Dom Benedict Stapylton, for “a new and very ample confirmation” of Baker's writings, “as being the greatest treasure that belongs to this poor community”.<sup>104</sup>

This chapter offers a close reading of Gascoigne's *Account of Her Own Prayer*. In “Writing Habits”, Goodrich (2021) offered an interpretation of her text through the philosophical lens of the Buberian community. I, however, offer an analysis from a different perspective, applying feminist theory on religious women's agency to garner fresh insights into this important document. I maintain that the so-called “compliant models” of agency proposed by Avishai, Mahmood, and Bracke, outlined in previous chapters, offer an interesting perspective from which to interpret the religious experience of Gascoigne. As I will contend, Gascoigne, in a similar way to More and Constable, expressed her agency through, rather than despite, her religion.

There are at least three versions of Gascoigne's text: “a seventeenth-century copy from Cambrai and two eighteenth-century copies from Paris (the first dated 1724 and the second transcribed by

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<sup>101</sup> Downside 26589.

<sup>102</sup> Author's note: When possible, the quotations in this paper keep the original early-modern English spelling. Translations into modern English have been provided in square brackets next to each word only when the original spelling could impede the understanding.

<sup>103</sup> Julia Bolton Holloway from MS 1202 (1724) in the Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris. This is volume 119:23 of *Analecta Cartusiana*, published in Salzburg in 2006, pp. 382–96. It is also accessible at: <http://www.umilta.net/cath.html> [last accessed: 19 August 2022].

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*.

Mary Benedict [Mary] Dalley [professed 1719, d. 1761])” (Goodrich 2021: 18). The version analyzed here is MS 26589 (c. 1632), from Downside Abbey, Somerset. The text is a short, sixteen-page treatise, hence it does not allow the same level of analysis as More’s and Constable’s manuscripts, especially as far as Gascoigne’s mysticism is concerned.<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, I think Gascoigne’s text offers an interesting perspective on the complexity of the “blending” of her own ideas with those of Fr Baker’s and, as I will argue, herein lies an opportunity to say something specific and original about religious women’s agency in these types of circumstances.

The chapter opens with a bibliographical account of Gascoigne’s life and of her position at the Cambrai monastery. Then a close reading of her treatise on prayer will follow, together with a comparison to Gertrude More’s *Apology*, as the two texts bear many resemblances.

## **7.2 From an Early Call to Religious Life to the Role of Abbess at Cambrai**

Catherine Gascoigne, one of nine children (four boys and five girls), was born at Barnbow, West Yorkshire, in 1601. She was the daughter of Sir John Gascoigne, first baronet (1557–1637), and his wife, Anne of Lawkland, née Ingleby (d. 1637). Both were devout Catholics and four of their children became Benedictines. The elder brother of Catherine, John (Dom Placid), was the president of the English Benedictine congregation from 1649 to 1653 and was the life abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Lamspringe<sup>106</sup> in Germany from 1651 to 1681 (Rhodes 2004).

Gascoigne displayed a profound sense of religious devotion, even as a young girl, and she longed to become a martyr. At the age of fourteen (or thereabouts—the exact age is not known), she created a rule for herself, following Benedictine teachings. She was supported in these aspirations by the Gascoignes’ chaplain, Dom Richard Huddleston (Stanbrook Abbey 1956: 5–6).

Although Gascoigne’s parents did not oppose her, they did encourage her to first take an active role in social life to test her vocation. However, at nineteen Gascoigne had already decided to “give her life to God, whatever that would involve” (Truran 1997: 158) and she asked permission from the Bishop of London to leave the country to start a religious life on the Continent. Permission was, however, denied because her striking beauty was considered an impediment to embarking on such a perilous journey. Soon after, in 1623, she contracted smallpox, which disfigured her beauty, so she

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<sup>105</sup> “To mark her golden jubilee, a moment of thanksgiving to God for 50 years in monastic life, Dame Anne Field produced an edition of Dame Catherine Gascoigne’s account of her prayer, a seminal work of Baker spirituality, and gave a copy to each member of the Stanbrook community: *This One Thing Only: An account of her way of prayer by Dame Catherine Gascoigne* (Worcester: Stanbrook Abbey, 1999).” From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Margaret Truran, 9 June 2022.

<sup>106</sup> “The Abbey of English Benedictine monks at Lamspring in Germany became a centre of Baker spirit through the Gascoigne family: a Gascoigne Abbess of Cambrai, a Gascoigne Abbot of Lamspring, and later a Gascoigne Prioress of Paris” (Rowell 2001: 84).

was finally allowed to travel to Douai with the intention of joining a French community that had been recommended by her brothers (Rhodes 2004). When she reached Douai, she was invited to join eight young English women—Helen (Gertrude) More, Margaret Vavasour, Anne Morgan, Grace and Ann More, cousins of Helen, Francis Watson, and two lay sisters, Mary Hoskins and Jane Martin, who were travelling to Cambrai to establish a monastery directed by English Benedictine monks. On 24 December 1623, Gascoigne entered “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai and, two years later, on 1 January 1625, she received the habit of St. Benedict, together with Gertrude More and the other seven companions (Rhodes 2004).

For the following ten years, Gascoigne and More stood “side by side, at first utterly alien to each other in mind and conversation but gradually transformed by grace so that they are compared [...] to David and Jonathan” (Stanbrook Abbey 1956: 9). They were initially guided in the so-called Ignatian method of prayer by three experienced nuns from the English Benedictine community in Brussels. This method derived from the practical side of the movement called “New Devotion”, introduced at the end of the fifteenth century: “Instead of the free and unsystematized approach to God of the earlier centuries, schemes were drawn up [...] whereby the Gospels were made the basis of a form of prayer which tended to become increasingly elaborate and rigidly planned” (Stanbrook Abbey 1956: 9). This form of prayer was discursive, involving both the imagination and the senses. However, Jesuit spirituality soon proved unsuitable for the Cambrai nuns, and in July 1624, the Benedictine monk Father Augustine Baker was sent to guide the English community in a more contemplative form of prayer. He revived the medieval form of contemplation through studying and sharing such fourteenth-century texts as Julian of Norwich's *Showing of Love*, Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, William Flete's *Remedies Against Temptations*, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the works of John Tauler and Henry Suso.<sup>107</sup>

At first, Baker was received enthusiastically, however, in time, his teachings began to provoke resistance. Yet, while it was More who initially opposed Baker, Gascoigne had embraced his contemplative way of prayer, and indeed remained faithful to it throughout her entire monastic life. Gascoigne encouraged More to meet with Baker, and her persistence worked. Ultimately, More accepted Baker and experienced the benefits of his spiritual advice also.

In 1629, Gascoigne was appointed abbess of Cambrai, and she was re-elected every four years until her resignation in 1673. As abbess of Our Lady of Consolation, she was responsible for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the community, but these duties proved particularly challenging, especially in the 1640s, when the English Civil Wars significantly reduced the convent's investments.

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<sup>107</sup> Julia Bolton Holloway from MS 1202 (1724) in the Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris. This is volume 119:23 of *Analecta Cartusiana*, published in Salzburg in 2006, pp. 382–96. It is also accessible on the internet at Julia's website: <http://www.umilta.net/cath.html> [last accessed: 12 May 2022].

By 1650, the community numbered fifty nuns. A few years later, it was affiliated to the Benedictine community of “Our Lady of Good Hope” in Paris. Both communities still exist, at Stanbrook Abbey, Wass, North Yorkshire, and St Mary's Abbey, Colwich, Staffordshire, respectively (Rhodes 2004).

The year Gascoigne was appointed abbess, Father Francis Hull was invited to become the convent's chaplain, upon which he accused Father Augustine Baker of anti-authoritarian and heterodox doctrines. In 1633, Baker and Hull were both ordered to submit the accounts of their teachings as well as their manners of prayer to the General Chapter of the English congregation. Gascoigne and More were also asked to provide accounts of their manners of prayer (Rhodes 2004). More's exposition of the contemplative life Baker taught her was printed in the edition of her *Spiritual Exercises*, published in 1658. Gascoigne composed a simple and short *Account of her own prayer* (Downside 26589). This was approved by the English Benedictine Congregation's theologians who encouraged her so: “Goe on couragiously, you have choosen the best way: we beseech Almighty God to accomplish that union which your hart desireth” (Stanbrook Abbey 1956: 17). They also endorsed Father Baker's writings, but both Baker and Hull were nonetheless removed from Cambrai.

In 1655, the controversy resurfaced as Gascoigne was requested again, this time by Father Claude White, then president of the English Benedictine congregation, to hand over all of Father Baker's manuscripts to be purged of their “poysonous, pernicious and diabolicall doctrine” (Gascoigne, Letters, 45). As previously explained, in the so-called “Bodleian Letters”, Gascoigne firmly refused and Father White accused her of “in a damnable way running to perdition” (Gascoigne, Letters, 45).

In March 1655, she asked for support from Father Anselm Crowder—her agent in England—and from Father Augustine Conyers. She even considered withdrawing the community from the congregation to protect Baker's writings, but Father White's death later that year silenced the whole polemic. However, she always remained protective of the manuscripts which, in 1676, she described to Father Benedict Stapylton as “the greatest treasures that belongs to this poor community” (St Mary's Abbey, Colwich, MS 43). He recommended that “the Ladie Abbess [...] put them into such hands as you shall desire that they may be preserved entire and without alteration” (Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille 20 H10, fol. 505, quoted in Walker 2014: 242).

Gascoigne was the dedicatee of Serenus Cressy's edition of Baker's works, *Sancta Sophia*, and of a collection of Gertrude More's writings, *The Holy Practices of a Divine Lover*, both published in 1657. Following the confrontation with Fr White, Cambrai entered a period of declining admissions and indeed, except for Gascoigne's niece, Frances (1637–1708), who arrived in July 1655, there were no further candidates until 1660. Gascoigne retired as abbess in 1673 and died on 21 May 1676 at Our Lady of Consolation, Cambrai, where she was buried (Rhodes 2004).

### 7.3 *Account of Her Own Prayer*<sup>108</sup>

In *Account of Her Own Prayer*, Gascoigne begins her treatise by declaring that she does not know how to express or define her prayer, but to her it seems that it is “a longing” and a “vehement desire” (329) of her soul, which seeks the presence of God as its only good. In Gascoigne’s understanding, prayer is therefore “only exercised in the will” (329) as it originates from a personal desire of unity with God, and not from external rules. Prayer could take many forms, she continues, such as “praising, blessing and adoring” (329); “acts or aspirations”; and an “elevation of the will towards God” [...] “proceeding from an interior motion” (330). Although the desire to “please and praise God” remains the same, Gascoigne writes that the “disposition of the soul” can change. When this happens, and she finds herself unable to pray, there is no way forward other than “patience and resignation”, as she finds no benefit in forcing either herself and/or her nature (329–31).

As were More and Constable, Gascoigne was instructed by Fr Baker into the apophatic tradition and negative theology, according to which God was unknowable and inscrutable, and could not be reduced to a particular image or creature. Moreover, according to the apophatic tradition, the only way to approach God was through abnegation or, in other words, through a renunciation of self-will, and the emptying of the mind of set ideas and images to be replenished by His presence. Sister Margaret Truran, a former nun at Stanbrook Abbey, the descendant community of Cambrai, whom I interviewed for this research, affirmed that it is important to consider abnegation as “a necessary means to an end, but not an end in itself”.<sup>109</sup> In other words, it is a means that “should enable and facilitate the love union with God”,<sup>110</sup> and not to be sought for voluntary or extra mortification, or suffering. In *Account of Her Own Prayer*, Gascoigne presented this teaching very clearly, as she explained “how she is drawn to a prayer which tends to a unity without adhering to any particular image or creature, but seeking only for that one thing which our Saviour said to be necessary”.<sup>111</sup> For Gascoigne, God was the “one thing”, not equivalent to any other thing, but rather “above All things” (Goodrich 2021: 16). In *Account of Her Own Prayer*, Gascoigne wrote: “What this one thing is? I cannot express, yet I know where is nothing which either is or can be imagined better and more perfect [...]” (333). Her orientation was solely towards God, He was the center of her wishes and desires and, as Goodrich (2021) argues, “it is only when she turns in the direction of this divine Other and avoids the ‘Multeplicite’ of the It-world that she can find spiritual rest” (16). “It is my God”, Gascoigne wrote in *Account of Her Own Prayer*, “whome to serve and to love is my only felicitie and happiness” (333).

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<sup>108</sup> Downside 26589.

<sup>109</sup> From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Margaret Truran, dated: 1 August 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>111</sup> From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Margaret Truran, dated: 1 August 2022.

In *Account of Her Own Prayer*, Gascoigne continues by saying that the way she tended and aspired toward God was “by love and affection” (334). She admits that “this plaine and simple exercise of the will” (343) was taught to her by Father Baker and it tended to nothing but “to bring the soule to a total subjection to God, and to others for God and according to his will” (343). Moreover, she writes that the “way of love” did not distract her from the performance of her duties and obligations, nor did it cause neglect and disobedience toward her superiors (334). On the contrary, it led her to observe her duties more “cheerefully”, “readily”, and “with more purity of intention” (334), being focused on accomplishing God’s will, not hers. This “affectuous inclination towards God” (334) enabled her to make use of all things for her spiritual advancement, for, she said, “nothing is required of us in our state of life but that if we know how to make right use of it, it will further us in our way” (335). She mentioned especially the moments of communal prayer, such as the divine office and the service of the quire, which were “immediately belonging to the praise and worships of God” (335) and she found them a great help (335).

In her *Account*, Gascoigne also praised this “exercise of love”, as it was for her “the best means and way to purchase all vertues” (335), “for it is the way of humility, of abnegation, of sincere obedience, of perfect submission and subjection to God, and to every creature for his love” (336). She wrote that she is at rest when she leaves everything to God, trusting in His love and knowing that knowing that all will be well, and whatever happens, even the worst things, are under His permission (342). This is the “true and perfect resignation”, which derives from total conformity to the divine will out of love (342). No exercise or manner of prayer, continued Gascoigne, were so secure for the soul than simple affective prayer, which helped avoid “the most detestable sine of pride” (338), as well as the “illusions and deceits of the devil” (338), although she admitted one had to have “an aptness and call unto it” (339).

I think it is interesting that Gascoigne takes such an active role in her text, first in defending affective prayer and the way of abnegation and, second, in leaving a personal testimony of “the excellency and worthiness of this most happy exercise” (*Account of Her Own Prayer*, 343). She demonstrated how the way of simple, affective prayer did not stand in opposition to her Rule and to obedience to superiors. Indeed, to the contrary, she repeatedly underlined how affective prayer helped her better accomplish her duties and enjoy communal life in the convent. This way, I think, she wittingly authorized Baker’s teachings for herself and for her community because she left her testimony that the spiritual way indicated to the nuns by Baker led to their acquiring all the necessary virtues to better perform their religious and communal duties.

In the following section, I will compare Gascoigne’s *Account* of prayer with More’s *Apology*, as I believe the two texts share many common traits and show the agentic capacity of the nuns. Both



More and Gascoigne defended the spiritual exercises in which they felt such personal fulfilment, yet simultaneously, they struggled to secure legitimization of them from their superiors. To accomplish this end, they had to find the appropriate language and arguments to prove the perfect adherence of Baker's teachings to the Rule and to the statutes of their convent.

#### **7.4 More's "Apology" and Gascoigne's "Account of Her Own Prayer"**

In her *Apology*, More, like Gascoigne, wrote that she could not find anything in Baker's books and instructions, on the grounds of which to neglect her superior's commands and orders (16). Quite the contrary, they "tend only, and wholly to humble the soul" (16) and "not any book which he has written has ever tended to anything else, then that which we should live with all submission and subjection to God and our superiors" (17). Yet the form of obedience More refers to here, drawing from Baker, is far from blind, but rather encourages the soul to actively discern and follow its call and disposition, through the help of spiritual directors. More, sounding a note of caution, said, however, that the latter could also be an impediment to this end, if they imposed a rigid scheme of prayer or a particular prayer method, or when they asked the penitent to overcome sins by force and violence (24). Baker taught the nuns to follow their own inclination in prayer instead, and not be daunted with sins and scruples (24). More wrote: "But God did show to me plainly in reading father Baker books that my way was to overcome myself as I could, not as I would" (24).

Like Gascoigne, in her *Apology* More repeatedly underlined the personal benefits she received from following Baker's instructions, which she called "plaine, simple, easy and sweet" (14) and she said that what she affirmed in the *Apology* was by her own experience (17). More added:

This therefor was that which made me so affect F. Baker's instructions at first when he delivered them because I saw they were grounded upon God, (not upon him) who could never fail whatsoever became of him. And by this regarding God in all, and doing all out of obedience to him; our soul becomes so humble, that it lives in a manner, as subject to all she lives with as any one can be to any Superior in the world. (28)

In the above, More is highlighting a similar point to that made by Gascoigne, namely, that total submission to God's will leads to perfect humility of the soul and to external obedience because the latter is endured out of love for God. At the same time, however, More is also implicitly criticizing domineering superiors who seek to control and tyrannize souls and to tie them to themselves instead of to God. Here she proves more open and assertive than Gascoigne, who does not express this criticism in her treatise on prayer. More directed the reader's attention to the primacy of the divine

call, which was for her the source of all spiritual benefits. She also implicitly and wittingly criticized those superiors who did not place God's will above everything's else. "For God", More wrote, "and none but He is that true, an immediate teacher, and director in the most obscure and supernatural way of Contemplation" (40). Referring to contemplation, More also argued that

no man though never so learned and accurately witted can discern, or find out of himself. The most spiritual man in the world cannot instil this light into another. All it can do is exteriorly to teach a soul how to dispose herself for it. (41)

Baker was able to guide More to the contemplative practices most appropriate for her, because he did not substitute himself to God, but rather helped her discern a call, which came from "the only able teacher" and "the Contemplative Maister" (49). More gave several reasons why God only should "performe the office of a Contemplative Maister" (50): first, because internal direction precedes external instructions and, second, because He is "an infallible one" and His nature is not changeable as men's (50–51). In More's words, "God changes not his opinion of vs, as the humour of the Confessor may be" (56). It then becomes clear how important and delicate the role of the spiritual director was because, without the proper instruction, the soul could not prosper, indeed, its nature could even become worse (42). In this respect, More wrote:

For liuing in Religion (as I can speake by experience) if one be not in a right course between God and our soul: ones nature growes much worse; then euer it would haue been, if they had liued in the world. (13)

She continued:

And in that only wil they find their progress to consist, to observe what it is God exacts of them, and enables them to do; and not what others do or can do, or have done. For as we all differ in face so do we differ in the manner of our exercises that are interior. (46)

Drawing from St. Teresa of Avila, More also underlined the importance for spiritual guides to be both "learned" and "spiritual": "And verily I am of Saint Teresaes mind that learned men are not so apt to put souls out of their way, as the vnlearned are" (42). More was "most afraid" of those who were "so spiritual, or understand our case neuer so wel" (48). She also reported a negative personal experience of spiritual direction, when the father "did turn twenty things [...] which my other confessors made

no great matter of, into horrible mortal sins, and would have frightened me from the sacraments till I had settled my conscience according to his will, and mind” (55), continuing: “Verily if I had thus put myself on him, I had done great wrong to God” (55–56). More sharply criticized those who wanted to exercise “absolute government” over the souls, to the point that the latter “neither dare speak, think, or do anything without their approbation” (56–57). Indeed, More said this was tantamount to “a turning of religious Obedience to a policy abominable to be thought or named” (57). More believed that certain men exploited obedience to their own advantage in order to control souls and exercise their own absolute power over them, thus condemning them to a miserable life of fear. She also affirmed that some spiritual men did prefer to keep women ignorant about spiritual matters, so they might be “more easily ruled” (64). Such men, More asserted, believed that puffing them up with knowledge procured to them no benefit (64). More strongly believed that those souls who led a true internal life by seeking and loving God above all things “would become masters of themselves” (67) and should stay in no fear to err. For example, she expressed her opinion clearly about Jesuit spiritual exercises, based on schemes and discourse and aimed, according to her, at religious people conducting an active life, hence she felt they were not appropriate for enclosed nuns whose life was based on contemplation rather than action (63).

I think it is interesting how More never denied or openly rejected her religious vows in the Apology, but rather wittingly exploited them to affirm her right to interior freedom and to restore the purity of these vows against those spiritual directors who exploited them for their own ends. If More had used different language, namely one of opposition against the Rule, she almost certainly would have run the risk of being silenced and opposed. By expressing anti-authoritarian arguments through the use of submissive and plain language, and by never subverting any religious hierarchy, I think she made her text not only acceptable, but also successful in clearing Baker’s reputation. More grounded her apology of Baker’s teachings on the fact that they enabled a better accomplishment of both the Rule and religious vows. I would argue that this is the same strategy that Gascoigne employed in her treatise on prayer.

Another element which, in my opinion, enabled More to express her mind so clearly and assertively, was the reference she made in her text to saints and to contemplative authors she had read, who were widely acclaimed and recognized as spiritual models. We do not find the same references in Gascoigne’s short treatise, which is more a personal account of her own prayer method. For instance, in the Apology, More often quoted from St. Teresa of Avila, as seen above, and from St. Paul, when he said that “power was not giuen for distruction, but for edification” (106). Moreover, referring to Saint Thomas More (86), St. John of the Cross, and Balthasar Alvarez of the Society of

Jesus (103), More went as far as defending the right of the soul to disobey superiors, when they commanded not in God's power, but their own:

And a soul shal always find contradiction from some Superior, or other: And yet if the soul liue in her *interior* as she should, it wil be no impediment to her progress, no more then it was to *S. Teresa, Ionannes de Cruce, Balthazar Aluares* of the Society of Iesvs who was persecuted by his order, and his writings suppress [...] And these souls though they might seeme to others to haue varied from true *Obedience*; yet the effect shewed they were far from such matter [...]. (103)

In the above, More is saying that Avila, St. John of the Cross, and Balthasar Alvarez of the Society of Jesus had to endure contradictions from their superiors when they strove to follow their interior call. Indeed, Alvarez was even persecuted by his own order and his writings were suppressed. It might seem that in doing so, they were not observing obedience to superiors, but this was not the case, as they were accomplishing God's will by living their interior call, even when the latter did not initially meet the approval of their superiors. According to More, obedience is pleasing to God, and it is an advancement to the soul, not when it is observed to please the superior, but when it comes from the interior, or, differently put, from God only: "But it is an *Obedience* that regardeth *God*, and that doth what *he* would: And not a foolish pretended Obedience which is in the letter, and not in the spirit" (103, emphasis in original). More continued:

in these dayes [...] true Obedience is so little knowne, and where Obedience is counted to be practised in perfection, when the subiect is punctual out of a sympathy of nature with his Superior, and can by reason of a quiet nature magnify him, and think that they must haue no other relation to God in his world then by their Superior, whom to please, and whose good wil, and good word to enjoy is the perfection of what they came for, without further acquaintance with God in their soul. (104)

More makes a distinction here between blind obedience, which aims at pleasing the superior without an internal relation with God, and true obedience, which is grounded on "acquaintance with God in the soul" (104). The former "vanishes away as smoke" (104), without procuring any benefits to the soul, while true obedience generates peace and rest, as she knows that every mortification or suffering is under God's permission and leads to advancement in spiritual life. However, as Gascoigne also pointed out, More clarifies that perfect resignation to God's will always results in humility and

obedience to external authorities, as “the interior call neuer contradicteth the exterior [...]” (83). This, I contend, is a central issue in both women’s arguments, as it demonstrates that Baker’s doctrines do not lead to opposition or rejection of authorities, but rather to submission to them. This submission, however, results from obedience to God first and it is observed out of love for Him, and not vice versa.

Returning to the first pages of the Apology, More said that what she wrote, may perhaps appear “a little presumptuous” (7). However, she declared she did it “but for her private comfort and helpe, and to be seene by no other, but against my wil, my superiors only excepted” (7). Moreover, she said she wrote “in more light to read when I am either in obscurity of temptation, or other bodily indisposition” (8). I think More suggests here that her writings served a more private than public function and she submitted everything she wrote to her superiors’ judgement, from whom she could not and would not conceal anything. However, her text would have had significant public impact, as it was later published and disseminated well beyond the walls of Cambrai. The same could not be said for Gascoigne’s treatise on prayer, which has remained in manuscript form only. However, as we have seen, they both raised very similar points to justify Baker’s teachings and doctrines and, while the two nuns never rejected the Rule, they strove to defend their interior call and disposition against any external attempt to control them.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This chapter offered a close reading of the *Account of Her Own Prayer*, an apologetic religious text that was written by the then abbess of Cambrai, Dame Catherine Gascoigne, an ardent disciple of Baker. The text was presented in 1633, together with Dame Gertrude More’s Apology, to the English Benedictine Congregation’s Chapter, with the aim of clearing Baker of accusations of heterodoxy. In this short treatise on prayer, Gascoigne left a personal testimony of the spiritual benefits she received from Baker’s teachings on affective prayer and abnegation, and she underlined how the latter allowed her to better accomplish her religious duties and acquire virtues such as “humility”; “sincere obedience”; and “perfect submission and subjection to God, and to every creature for his love” (336). I argued that this was a strategy Gascoigne used to authorize Baker’s spiritual course. In other words, although his doctrines were focused on finding one’s interior call and disposition, and not on blind obedience, Gascoigne affirmed that they resulted in perfect submission to superiors, and in this way, she managed to clear Baker from any suspicion of rebellion to clerical authorities. The same argument was presented by Dame Gertrude More in her Apology, however, unlike Gascoigne, More openly condemned any external attempt from spiritual directors to tie the soul to themselves instead of to God.

I contended that through their texts, Gascoigne and More exercised their agentic capacity, not against or despite their religious belonging, but rather through it, as they demonstrated how Baker's teachings had no aim other than helping the nuns better live their religious and communal life. At the same time, however, the two nuns proved themselves to be active, rather than passive recipients of Baker's guidance, as they personally experienced the benefits of his teachings, leaving written testimony to that effect.

## 8 The Legacy of Father Baker at Stanbrook Abbey

### 8.1 Introduction

In October 1793, the convent of “Our Lady of Consolation” in Cambrai was captured by French revolutionaries. They seized both the house and its properties, arrested its twenty-two nuns, and sent them to a prison in Compiègne, where four of them died due to the extreme hardship they encountered. They were freed on 25 April 1795, following the downfall of Robespierre, whereupon they returned to England. The nuns first lodged in London, after which they joined the monks of the English Benedictine Congregation at Woolton in Lancashire (Weld-Blundell 1912). In 1807, they then moved to Abbots Salford in Warwickshire, and in 1838 they finally settled at Stanbrook Abbey in Worcestershire. Recently, they have re-settled at Wass in North Yorkshire (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location n. 209-221).<sup>112</sup>

As descendants of the Cambrai community, the English Benedictine nuns of Stanbrook still observe enclosure and follow the Rule.<sup>113</sup> The Abbey also has a reputation for its contribution to the preservation and spread of Catholic literature and Gregorian Chant (Weld-Blundell 1912). As Sister Margaret Truran<sup>114</sup> explained, “there are two main pillars of monastic life at Stanbrook: Baker's teaching, which inspires personal prayer, and the liturgy, i.e., the choral worship of the Church, which punctuates the prayer of the hours throughout the day and gives shape to the timetable”.<sup>115</sup>

Inspired by Abbot Guéranger of Solesmes, it was Fr Laurence Shepherd, Vicarius (chaplain) at Stanbrook from 1863–1885, who taught the nuns to place the liturgy above everything else (as indeed St Benedict lays down in the Rule) and emphasized its ecclesial dimension.<sup>116</sup>

This chapter explores the views of today’s Stanbrook Benedictine nuns on Baker’s spirituality and historical heritage, analyzing the role his teachings play, both their personal and communal lives. After consultation with the current abbess, Sister Anna Brennan, I interviewed three members of the

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<sup>112</sup> <https://www.stanbrookabbey.org.uk/page-home.html> [last accessed: 17 March 2022].

<sup>113</sup> “Since Vatican II enclosure is observed in the form prescribed in chapter 66 of the Rule of St Benedict. There are no longer the double grilles that became prevalent in houses of contemplative nuns from the time of the Counter-Reformation. Nuns can go outside the enclosure for reasons of health (dentist, doctor etc.) or for purposes of study. Or to go shopping for necessary items.” From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Margaret Truran, dated: 25 March 2022.

<sup>114</sup> She was a former archivist at Stanbrook and now she is resident at *Monastero delle Benedettine di Santa Cecilia*, Rome, Italy.

<sup>115</sup> “The liturgy was sung with great zeal at Cambrai; the nuns even rose at midnight. That was not resumed after the French Revolution; the night office has been said either in the late evening, or (as now) in the very early morning.” From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Margaret Truran, dated: 4 April 2022.

<sup>116</sup> From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Margaret Truran, dated: 4 April 2022.

monastery. The nuns, each of whom authorized the publication of their answers in this thesis, were sent written questions to which they replied. The first interviewee was Sister Laurentia Johns, the second, Sister Philippa Edwards, and the third, Sister Margaret Truran. I also interviewed Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob, who was a professed Benedictine nun at Stanbrook Abbey for nearly twenty years. No longer at Stanbrook, she is currently working as project manager developing an Institute for the Study of Anglican Religious Life, at St Antony's Priory, Durham. In 2022 she was awarded her Doctorate at Durham University with a dissertation entitled "From Exile to Exile? Repatriation, Resettlement and the Contemplative Experience of English Benedictine Nuns in England 1795–1887".

A different method, ethnography, is employed for this phase of my research, consisting of written interviews that have been authorized for publication. Hence, it follows a different format to previous chapters. However, as I argue below, it offers an original and valuable contribution to my investigation of religious women's agency. The unedited material that follows addresses if and how Baker's doctrines still provide a source of spiritual empowerment for the nuns at Stanbrook. What is the influence of his teachings on the everyday lives of the nuns? Furthermore, how do they blend their religious perspectives with his?

In previous chapters, I argued that the Cambrai nuns' agentic capacity was exercised through, rather than despite, their religious belonging. On the one hand, they rejected blind obedience to domineering superiors, albeit never rejecting the Rule, while on the other hand, by building on medieval and contemporary contemplative life teachings, they developed their own mystical path. They expressed agency, not only by rejecting those who might co-opt or appropriate the authority to teach and instruct them for their own ends, but also via the use of self-depreciatory language, typical of female submissive language conventions (Goodrich 2019). I also explored some possible connections between such expressions of agency and the relationship the nuns had with Fr. Baker. I contend that the nuns of Cambrai achieved spiritual independence as a direct consequence of his spiritual guidance. In this chapter, I will investigate if and how Baker's doctrines remain a source of spiritual empowerment for the nuns at Stanbrook, and what the influence is of his teachings on their lives and the blending of their religious perspectives with his, considering that today's context of the post-Vatican II era (1962–1965) is completely different from that of post-Trent. The Second Vatican Council, for example, promoted the scriptural reading of the Bible instead of relying exclusively on devotional writings, booklets, and the lives of the saints, as the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council had done. It could thus be said that this chapter functions as a *trait d'union* between the past and the present. The complete versions of the four interviews are presented in the appendix.



## 8.2 Interview 1

Sister Laurentia Johns has been at Stanbrook since 1990. She has served the community in different roles, such as Novice Mistress and Kitchener. Currently, she is looking after the Oblates, their holiday homes business, and literary work.<sup>117</sup>

Johns believes the influence of Baker's spirituality in her community shows in "the rich variety of personalities" in the Stanbrook family and its "depth of charity". She says that "the Stanbrook community always privileges people and charity above rules and regulations" and "there is a certain sense of spaciousness in the community; a breadth and a depth, a lack of all that is narrow and constrained".

I think that these two elements are an expression of the Catholic concept of "interior liberty" or "inner freedom", which Baker taught to the nuns under his supervision. As previously argued, although this concept might have sounded unique at the time, it cannot be considered as original in the Catholic tradition, since it could be found already in St. John, St. Paul, and St. Augustine, as well as in the tradition from which Baker wrote (Higgins 1963: 158, 192). For example, St. Paul wrote: "[...] where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17). As Higgins (1963) highlighted, the end of interior liberty proposed by Augustine was "the fulfilment of the soul's movement toward Beatitude and the final enjoyment of God. The life of the Christian, then, in Baker is a progressive liberation under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (174).

For Johns, inner freedom means "not having to follow the majority" if her conscience "dictates a different path". It gives her "freedom to speak out candidly". "Liberty of spirit", she continues, "frees one up from seeking approval or recrimination; frees one up to love. In this it is close to purity of heart".

I find it interesting here how religious life, rather than limiting or forcing blind obedience to a set of external rules, becomes a resource that enables Johns to express herself and to follow her call. In fact, she specifically speaks of a "sense of spaciousness in the community; a breadth and a depth, a lack of all that is narrow and constrained", thus providing clear evidence of Baker's spirituality in

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<sup>117</sup> "Individuals living outside of the monastery but committing their lives to God and the Rule of St. Benedict are called oblates. The word oblate literally means "offering", a reference to early monasticism when it was common for families to send their children to monasteries as young disciples for their education". Today oblates are more commonly adults, men or women, and some are married with families. They live in the world outside the monastery, but they adhere to a lifestyle of prayer, obedience, and work. They make a spiritual promise to follow the Rule of St. Benedict and to live a Christian life according to the Gospel. Oblates may practice important daily prayers practices like the *Lectio Divina*, and generally they have very close contact with a monastic community and abbot or abbess." From: <https://www.abbaziamontecassino.org/index.php/en/worship/rule-saint-benedict-montecassino/9-benedictine-oblates-montecassino-abbey> [last accessed: 30 September 2022].

the community. As I argued in previous chapters, although Baker always encouraged the nuns to obey superiors and to observe the Rule, his ideas raised much controversy at the time, and he was accused of anti-authoritarian and heterodox doctrines for encouraging the nuns to follow their call. Johns believes the reasons for such a strong opposition to Baker are also to be found in the difficulty “for those in authority when people claim to have an inner authority from the Spirit—a so-called ‘hot-line to God’”. In other words, freedom of spirit contrasted with the pretense of control over women’s spirituality on the part of the male clergy, which imbued the post-Trent atmosphere.

Another element of continuity between Cambrai and Stanbrook that Johns underlines, is the daily prayer routine of the nuns, which is prescribed clearly in the Rule. The nuns should observe two half-hour sessions of mental prayer a day: one in the morning and one in the evening. Moreover, they are expected to attend Mass and recite the Divine Office six times a day with the whole community. The type of mental prayer that Baker found particularly useful for women in general, and for nuns of contemplative orders in particular, was the so-called “prayer of sensible affection” (Baker 2002: xxxviii, 72). Johns affirms that simple affective prayer does have an impact on her personal prayer too. When asked how she prays, Johns replied: “By becoming still and silent and so tuning into God’s presence and trying to be totally present to him.” It is interesting to note that Johns does not refer here to repetitive types of prayer, such as vocal or discursive, seeking a personal, loving encounter with God instead.

This primacy of the relationship with God over rules also impacts on the nuns’ approach to the Sacrament of Confession. Baker taught Gertrude More not to be “daunted with [...] sins” (Apology 24) and did not ask her to confess more than was necessary for her spiritual progress since all would be well if she tended to God by prayer and renounce “al inordinate affections to created things” (Apology 24). As a confessor, Baker firmly discouraged scrupulosity of conscience as “the dayly reccountinge or callinge to mind of sinnes doth darken the soule” (Baker 2006: 117) and hence becomes a hindrance to spiritual progress. In his *Treatise of Confession* (approved in 1629) he wrote:

This scrupulosity of conscience often-times causeth some things to be sinnes wch in themselues are not sinnes; & it proceedeth from a twofold beginninge. The first is an inordinate loue of himselfe, because yt/ out of that inordinate loue commeth inordinate feare [...] because that whatsoever they doe, they do it not out of loue (or charity), but out of feare & compulsion, least they be damned [...] The other source or roote of scrupulosity is, that their / loue towards God is but little, because that little loue doth cause but a little confidence [...]. (Baker 2006: 121)

Baker placed the love for God and the confidence in His mercy above sin and consequent scrupulosity. More specifically, he claimed scrupulosity had two roots: one being an inordinate love for oneself; the second, too little love for God and confidence in His mercy. In the first case, Baker stated that an inordinate love for oneself would generate an inordinate fear, as the penitent did not behave out of love or charity, but out of compulsion and fear of punishment. He continued:

Scruples do allso often grow in vs, for that we haue not a sufficient vnderstandinge of the goodness of God & of his desire to saue our soules; & therefore such do greatly wronge his diuine goodness, not ac/counting of it as they ought; yea they make God as it were an enuious wordly judge, that should euery way seeke means to ouerthrow the accused person. For if they knew wth what a desire God did continually seeke our saluation, they could neuer so readely fall into such errorrs. (Baker 2006: 123)

Baker suggested that God was not a judge, ready to catch us in our falls and misbehaving, but a lover instead, who continuously sought our happiness and salvation. For Baker, scrupulosity was rooted in this fear of God as a judge rather than confidence in His mercy and in His being a loving father who seeks our happiness and freedom. When I asked Johns how she approaches the Sacrament of Confession, she replies “with confidence in God’s love and mercy”. She therefore seems to confirm the influence of Baker’s teachings here, as she is not focused on herself and on her sins, but on the mercy of God.

In addition to liturgy, the Rule also prescribes manual labor and spiritual reading—the latter for at least thirty minutes a day. As Dorothy Latz (1997) underlines, Baker “established a veritable atelier at Our Lady of Consolation at Cambrai, where the English Benedictine nuns translated, copied, collected, and were inspired to imitate medieval and 16–17th century spiritual and mystical writings” (15). In addition, Baker composed numerous treatises, advice books, and prayer manuals to enrich and enlarge the convent’s library (Walker 2004: 240). In her readings, Johns says she privileges “Scripture, Patristic authors” and “the Mystics”. Among the authors she reads more frequently are her foundresses, “Dames Catherine Gascoigne, Gertrude More and Margaret Gascoigne”, and many other women authors, such as “Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, the two Teresas, Adrienne Von Speyr, Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Caryl Houselander, Evelyn Underhill”.<sup>118</sup> She also mentions a number of contemporary authors, namely “Dame Felicitas Corrigan, Dame Maria Boulding and Dame Anne Field”. It is particularly interesting here that Gertrude More and Catherine Gascoigne appear among her readings, suggesting the influence that these women still have on the

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<sup>118</sup> Teresa of Àvila and Thérèse of Lisieux.

spirituality of the Stanbrook nuns. It must also be said that the context in which Johns lives, namely the post-Vatican II era, is completely different from that of seventeenth-century England, when women were monitored and guided in their readings out of fear of their incapacity to control themselves.

Toward a passive contemplation of God, Baker identified and taught three stages of mental prayer to the nuns under his supervision. The first was spiritual reading, while the second comprised active contemplation, also called “spiritual aspirations” or “spiritual elevations”. The third and final step was passive contemplation or mystic union (Walker 2004: 139). Mystic union was understood by Baker as an abstraction from materiality and the bodily senses to achieve a direct affective and spiritual contact with God and it was Him who conceded this special grace and favor to the soul (More 2009: xii–xiii). “This phase involved using the previous steps to show how ‘God was to be contemplated ‘aboue all images and formes’” (Wolfe 2004: 140). As David Lunn (1975) writes, “strictly speaking, mysticism is the union of the soul with God, or the ultimate stages in the search of it, using self-denial and the prayer of contemplation for its attainment” (267). Discursive prayer or meditation, which is rooted in the intellect and in the imagination, was then preparatory for contemplation itself. Gertrude More believed and acted “on the principle that contemplation is the normal means of approaching God in prayer for all Christians, not the exclusive privilege of a few specially gifted souls” (Norman 1976: 208). Although Baker fits her progress into “stations” (Norman 1976: 206), “roughly corresponding to the traditional divisions into purgative, illuminative and mystical ways, Gertrude herself uses no such terms” (Norman 1976: 206); “to her only two things matter: faith and love” (Norman 1976: 206).

I asked Johns if she could provide her definition of mysticism and if she could claim to have ever experienced it. Although she prefers not to speak of her personal experience, Johns agrees with the writings of Gertrude More and Catherine Gascoigne and their accounts of prayer, which they both wrote in defense of Baker at the behest of the English Benedictine Congregation Chapter. As Johns explains, Gascoigne defined prayer as “the search for that one thing which our Saviour said to be necessary and which contains all things in itself—my God, to whom to adhere and to inhere is a good thing”. Johns continues: “mysticism needs to be seen within the context of Christ’s Paschal Mystery which gives the baptised access through Christ to God”. In other words, the way mysticism is understood today is not related to visions, ecstasies, or other extraordinary phenomena, but rather with an internal union with God and a sharing in his Resurrection, which is open to everybody. Johns says:

Mysticism involves an unmediated sense of God's presence to a certain degree, though if we believe, as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, that "the world is charged with the glory of God" ("God's Grandeur"), even apparently unmediated touches of God, say through the beauties of nature, are actually charged with his presence and so are mediated by his Holy Spirit which is also the spirit of Christ.

I suggest that Johns' definition of mysticism could be compared to that of More, as it is not a privilege for the initiated few, but rather a personal relationship with God that every layman and woman can enjoy in their everyday life—for example when contemplating the beauty of the world, as they are "charged with the glory of God", and therefore led to unity with Him.

Finally, another pillar of the Rule and of Baker's spirituality was abnegation. He and Gertrude More "belonged to a tradition of mystical writers who believed in the value of the *via negativa*, i.e. a path to union with God through total self-abnegation and the emptying of the mind of set ideas and images" (More 2009: 13). Abnegation consists, as taught in the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, in finding joy and fulfilment in God alone and in renouncing all earthly inordinate affections for creatures, but also for oneself. In More's understanding, abnegation meant giving her heart, mind, body, and soul entirely to God, without retaining anything for herself or for other creatures, so that God could accomplish His will in her. In other words, she emptied herself to be replenished with God's presence and grace. Johns says she tends to "think of 'abnegation' as 'mortification', a term used by Father Baker, and which resonates with that 'death' of the old self of which St Paul speaks in for example Colossians 3". For Johns, "that death is in order to share in the resurrected life of the Risen Christ. Every renunciation is an annunciation of this new life. So, we are back to the Paschal Mystery."<sup>119</sup> In other words, abnegation must be interpreted in the light of the so-called "Paschal Mystery" and is not to be understood as a spiritual end in itself, but as a means or a way to reach unity with God. The aim is thus sharing God's beatitude in the Resurrection, and every cross or difficulty should be sought, not for itself, but as a means to that end.

### 8.3 Interview 2

Sister Philippa Edwards has been at Stanbrook since October 1970. Before she and the community moved from the old Stanbrook in Worcestershire, she oversaw the guest house for several years, and was assistant librarian for many years, which included putting the whole library onto a database and packing all the books. When she was younger, she worked in the kitchen and the infirmary.

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<sup>119</sup> The term "Paschal Mystery" refers to God's plan of salvation of humankind through four events in Christ's life: his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Subsequently, she completed a course in spiritual direction, which became her principal work for some years before the community moved and she therefore had to leave her directees behind.

Like Johns, Edwards believes that “Fr Baker’s influence is still very strong” at Stanbrook today, although she admits that for her personally, the Rule of St Benedict, with its basis in quotations from the Bible from both the Old and the New Testaments, “is more of an influence [...] than Fr Baker”. This is a very interesting claim, as it shows how Baker never contradicted the Rule in his teachings to the Cambrai nuns. Rather, his doctrines were only intended to assist the nuns—a point supported by Gertrude More and Catherine Gascoigne. Edwards also acknowledges that while some nuns are more attracted to Baker’s texts than others, novice mistresses “have guided their novices in Fr Baker’s method of simple affective prayer”. She defines her personal prayer as follows:

How do I pray? Perhaps the first word that comes to mind is self-offering, trying to give my entire self to God holding nothing back. I gaze at the big Crucifix in our church and consciously unite my self-offering with that of Jesus on the Cross and in the Mass. I find phrases from the psalms often come to mind or simply the words “God, I love you” or the name of Jesus or Abba, Father. I find that consciously listening even with my physical ears, as if straining to hear distant music is a help to inner stillness. Exterior silence is the greatest help with this. I do find it difficult if other people in the church cough or turn the pages of a book.

Edwards, like Johns, does not describe prayer here in terms of discourse or thought, but rather as an act of spontaneously flowing love. I asked her how she personally adapts or understands the teachings of Baker in her contemplative life, and she mentioned a beautiful extract from Baker’s “The Anchor of the Spirit”, which she chose for a recent Office of the Dead. In this extract, Edwards says that “Baker uses the image of the compass whose needle constantly hovers near true North to show that the mind and heart should constantly be set on the One we love”. This is a very similar description of prayer to the one provided by Catherine Gascoigne in her treatise.

We come back here to the primacy of love over rules and regulations, which permeated Baker’s teaching and reflected itself also in the nuns’ approach to the Sacrament of Confession, as explained in the previous interview. Edwards stated that when she was younger, she found it difficult to recognize that she was sinful, and she still struggles today with identifying her sins, although she is confident that “repentance is the key to joy” and she believes “God speaks to me/us in all the details of my life”. Moreover, Edwards declares that “rules and regulations don’t feature at all when I examine my conscience before Confession”. What I think permeates Edwards’ reflection here is not

adherence (or not) to rules. Rather, she seems to suggest that she examines her actions through love—in other words, she tries to discern if her actions help her grow in her relationship with God and with others.

Edwards says that another element of continuity with Baker is the “strong spirit of inner freedom” that imbues the Stanbrook community. In describing how she understands this concept, she writes: “I believe ardently in relationships of equality, with religious superiors, friends, acquaintances; I have a strong aversion to being dominated by anybody, and no desire to dominate anybody else.” Edwards clarifies that she intends obedience as a “way of expressing love in action, that is[,] love of God, of the abbess and also other members of the community”, and she believes “all human relationships work only on a level of equality, even if one of the parties is an abbess or a bishop or whatever”. Edwards’ words seem to echo More’s here, when she criticized the tendency of male superiors to tyrannize souls and to impose their will on them, instead of providing guidance to discern God’s will and the interior call of the disciple. Edwards also thinks the reason for such a strong opposition to Baker at the time was due to “the human tendency to prefer strict rules to the liberty of spirit advocated by Fr Baker”. As indicated previously, the principle of inner freedom was not an invention of Baker, who was simply following St. John, St. Paul, and St. Augustine. However, it was considered problematic in the context of post-Trent, as it encouraged the initiative and responsibility of the penitent—in this case, of the woman—instead of placing her under the control of a male minister.

Moving now to the subject of spiritual reading, I asked Edwards about her approach and favorite authors. She stated that, generally speaking, she prefers “listening to reading”—in part because she experiences trouble with her eyes—and finds secular authors easier to read than spiritual ones. She reads all genres from “poetry, plays, literary criticism” to “biography, travel, etc.,” and admits she struggles with reading and studying the Bible and Scripture commentaries, although she has recently found “a lively young American Scripture scholar, Cynthia Parker, who teaches online in a very engaging manner”. Unlike the close supervision that the Cambrai nuns received—also from Baker, who monitored them by providing reading lists—one perceives, both in Johns and in Edwards here, much more freedom in choosing their material and favorite authors, among whom are many women, too. This difference is, of course, due to the prejudices and commonly held beliefs of early modern society regarding women’s inferior nature and their incapacity to control their curiosity and energies—a narrative that no longer applies.

In Baker’s understanding, as we have seen, spiritual reading, together with mental prayer, were preparatory stages for the passive contemplation of God. When asked to define mysticism, Edwards says it is “faithful loving, not dependent on mystical experiences”. She then admits having

had “moments, chunks of time, of intense and blissful silence”, which she would almost describe as “ecstatic”, but they are “unusual”. I note here how mysticism is not described by Edwards as something extraordinary, but as an intense relationship of love between the devotee and God, guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and hence impossible to enclose in a singular practice—something that is valid for everybody. Moreover, in the same way Johns underlined in the previous interview, mysticism must be understood today in the context of the Paschal Mystery and not as visionary experiences for a selected few. Here we can see again the similarity with More’s and Constable’s mystical experiences and with their tradition, which discouraged such phenomena.

Finally, Edwards recognizes that another pillar of Baker’s teaching, namely abnegation, is still relevant for her and the wider Stanbrook community. She defines it as “self-emptying” and says this is “a big part of self-offering”. She firmly believes that she needs to be “hollowed out in order to be open to God’s love and life” flowing into her and she continues: “I know very well that my own gratifying, my own self-will is not the way to happiness and that God’s plans for me are much better than my own could ever be.” I think here Edwards is saying that confidence in God’s love stems from trust in His having a plan for each of us; and every difficulty one encounters is, albeit mysteriously, inscribed in this plan. In my opinion, however, Edwards is not claiming one should renounce his/her own will and blindly adhere to what other people or superiors say. On the contrary, abnegation is grounded upon love, specifically, the way of love Christ taught to us, which is also the way of the cross and of mortification, and which eventually led to the greater good of the Resurrection. I believe this is the spirit in which Edwards understands abnegation.

### **8.4 Interview 3**

Sr Margaret Truran has been a nun at Stanbrook Abbey for 33 years. When the community moved to the north of England in 2009, Truran transferred to the Benedictine monastery of Santa Cecilia, Rome (Italy) for reasons of health. For many years she was an archivist and novice mistress at Stanbrook and served on the History Commission of the English Benedictine Congregation. She has contributed to many articles and chapters on Father Baker and his legacy.<sup>120</sup>

Truran contends that Baker’s spirituality “undoubtedly continues to have a formative influence in the Stanbrook community”, and more specifically “in the timetable, in its spirituality, in characteristic breadth of mind and discretion, and in the literary work undertaken by members of the community”. In the following paragraphs, I offer Truran’s perspective on each of these aspects.

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<sup>120</sup> See the Appendix for the list of publications.



As far as the timetable is concerned, an unusual feature is the second half-hour session of private prayer, added to the daily timetable, as it was laid down by Father Baker in the first Constitutions of the Cambrai community. Moreover, his spiritual teaching on prayer continues to be followed in the noviciate: Truran said that guidance is provided at this stage for the formation of good habits, but “the direction of what is essentially a personal relationship in prayer is left to the Holy Spirit”. In Baker’s understanding, the spiritual director should provide general guiding principles only and he discouraged dependence on external directors, since “God will be the faithful counsellor” and He alone is the “only master and director” (Holy wisdom or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation, 1876: 73–86 in Leclercq 1987: 60). Superiors should therefore avoid domineering attitudes, and should instead enable and facilitate prayer life by providing supervision and guidance, and not by imposing their will on the nuns or abusing their power to control them. Truran also explained that life at Stanbrook was based on “mutual trust” and nuns were instructed that, if the Abbess was not available to give permission on an urgent matter, they should “use their common sense and go ahead, then explain afterwards”. She added an interesting detail to this “breadth of mind”: “chapter 55 of the Rule of St Benedict, on clothing and footwear, lists the items a monk can expect to have at hand for his use, including a needle. As Baker pointed out, a needle is no use on its own, so thread must also be permitted.” This example shows that rules and regulations in prayer and communal life should not be interpreted as rigid schemes, never to be altered, but instead should serve the purpose of facilitating union with God and the relationships with the other members of the community, so they could be changed, if necessary.

Finally, regarding the influence of Baker on the literary work undertaken by members of the community, Truran explained that she entered the Stanbrook community in 1976 and many nuns have produced literary work about Fr Baker’s teachings since then, also showing his influence on their spirituality. Literary works were produced by the Stanbrook nuns, also about Gertrude More and Catherine Gascoigne, two of his most devoted advocates.<sup>121</sup> Incidentally, Truran says, “two postulants at their clothing in 1981 asked to receive the names Catherine and Helen (Dame Gertrude More’s baptismal name; there was a Dame Gertrude in the Stanbrook community at the time), echoing the names of the community’s foundresses”.

I have shown in previous chapters how Baker’s teachings caused controversy and, in this regard, Truran believes Baker “was rowing against the current of the time”. Jesuit spirituality was very popular in seventeenth-century English cloisters on the Continent—for example, they supported the founding of the Brussels convent in 1598. Baker, however, realized that their spirituality, which was focused on the use of imagination and on systematic prayer under spiritual direction, did not “suit

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<sup>121</sup> See the Appendix for the list of publications.

the needs and circumstances of the Cambrai nuns”. His doctrines were grounded on the concept of interior liberty or “freedom of spirit”, instead. Truran sees the latter as “a matter of personal responsibility. Prayer is not a system or a method but the development of a relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, a friendship guided by the gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit in the heart.” I interpret this as meaning that prayer, although regulated during the day through the Divine Office and other communal moments, originates from a personal desire for love and unity with God and is guided by the Holy Spirit—in other words, it might also take a different form, according to every person and to his/her internal disposition. Truran also underlines that the 1992 “Declarations for the nuns of the English Benedictine Congregation” required the novice mistress “to encourage those under her care in humility, self-denial, simplicity and liberty of spirit according to the traditions of our Order”, clearly illustrating the influence of Baker’s teachings in the twentieth century.

Referring to prayer, Truran highlights how it “is a matter of a relationship with God, who is Love”. It is interesting how she defines her personal prayer:

In general, prayer takes the form of opening the heart in the presence of our Lord, longing for him, and desiring to do his will and serve him. It can vary according to the hour of the day. After Mass, our Lord’s presence after Holy Communion fills the heart in thanksgiving; the needs of others are also often in mind. During the course of the day, it is helpful to lift the mind in prayer for a few moments from time to time; apart from Angelus, the sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* often come to mind, or a verse from the psalms, especially 118 (119 in bibles). After Compline at night, there is a chance to look back over the day in gratitude, but also recognize what needs to be acknowledged or put right.

It becomes clear here that prayer is a relationship with a living person, Christ, and although it does follow a routine in the nuns’ community life, this does not mean that it is schematic or rigid. On the contrary, the description above shows how, in Truran’s understanding, it is essentially an “opening of the heart in the presence of our Lord”.

The same goes for Confession. Truran argues that two feelings that characterize her experience of this Sacrament are “sorrow, because of what Christ suffered on our behalf in his human nature on account of our sins, and to set us free from them” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, she experiences “gratitude, because Christ’s resurrection from death has brought us the gift of adoption as children of God, and given us a new way of life”. I think it is interesting that she does not mention fear or a sense of guilt here, because she knows the relationship with God is similar to that

with a friend. In other words, it is based on love, not on judgement of the other's frailties and faults. Even correction of the penitent on the part of the confessor, when necessary, stems from love and from the desire to see the penitent fully realized and happy. In other words, it does not originate in a need to show power through the inflicting of a punishment. In her approach to Confession, Truran also explains that she tries to acknowledge her life "in the presence of the Lord, to seek help and healing. The priest is someone who overhears, receives and has the power delegated to free the penitent from one's sins. It should be simple and natural." It appears here how the priest fulfills an intermediary role between the penitent and God, and the penitent should feel the love of God for him/her through his presence. This is one reason for Confession to be "simple and natural".

Truran declares that the Stanbrook community still devotes a good deal of time to reading, as at Cambrai: "apart from the readings in the office and reading during mealtimes, a minimum of 30 minutes' private reading is expected; often it is much more than 30 minutes". I asked Truran what kind of texts she privileged, and she replied:

the texts of the sung liturgy, especially of Gregorian chant, are powerfully contemplative and remain in mind during the day: antiphons, psalms, hymns. The biblical and patristic readings of the Divine Office are a strand that nourish the mind in another way.

Among her favorite authors she cites St Augustine, the late mediaeval Orthodox writer Nicholas Cabasilas, and Bishop Erik Varden. I asked what women authors she read, and she replied she did not consciously distinguish between authors, but some of her favorites were Esther de Waal, "a laywoman, who has written very well on the Rule of St Benedict, for example, and her books are among those recommended to novices". Then Dame Julian of Norwich, and Dame Laurentia McLachlan, and philosophers such as Alasdair McIntyre, or Christopher Dawson "for a Catholic philosophical and political outlook".<sup>122</sup>

Moving to the topic of mysticism, and bearing in mind David Lunn's (1975) definition thereof, as well as Fr Baker's interpretation, I asked Truran if she could provide her personal definition of mysticism. She explained:

In our own time we tend to speak of "spirituality" and "spiritual", instead of "mysticism" and "mystic". Perhaps the "interior life of prayer" says it all. As Marion Norman [1976: 206] states, the interior life is not a matter of measuring stages in progress (an essentially

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<sup>122</sup> In 1931, Dame Laurentia was elected abbess of Stanbrook, until her death in 1953. She is included in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, published in 2004. See: <https://www.stanbrookabbey.org.uk/site.php?id=18> [last accessed: 11 June 2022].

self-centred attitude), but of growth in the love of God and in responsiveness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It is a way open to all. The best definition of “union with God” that I can think of are the words of St John (15:4), “Abide in me, and I in you”.

It seems clear to me in this definition how mysticism is not conceived as something extraordinary, but as an interior path of intimate affective union with God—one that is open to everybody and cannot be rigidly quantified. It is a personal experience inspired by the Holy Spirit, and everyone has to find his/her own way into it. Again, love and interior liberty seem to prevail here over external teachings and regulations. Truran added that Fr Baker wrote of the “Divin[e] Union”, “active and passive”, but he did not provide explanations of the qualities of these unions and said that they could be understood by experience only. Truran affirmed that she was inclined to agree with Baker on this point.

As argued in previous chapters, More’s and Constable’s mysticism could not be defined as merely sensory, as Caroline Walker Bynum (1987) understood it, as they did not experience any extraordinary bodily manifestations, such as visions or ecstasies. They were instructed into the apophatic tradition and negative theology, and read medieval authors such as Hilton and the Aeropagite, who were cautious about such phenomena. According to apophatic spirituality, God was inscrutable and unknowable, and in the tradition of the so-called “*via negativa*”, the only way to approach Him was through total self-abnegation and the emptying of the mind of set ideas and images to be replenished by his presence. Regarding abnegation, Truran underlined that Dame Gertrude and Fr Baker referred to “abnegation” “in two senses”: on the one hand, “to describe renunciation of self-will”, and on the other hand, “as an alternative to the word mortification”. The word “mortification”, Truran continued, is usually employed today

to express a feeling of being humiliated and ashamed. For Baker, it meant the discipline of dying to self. Together with prayer, mortification is the means to reach union with God [...]. It is a necessary means to an end, but not an end in itself.

As Baker pointed out, the Rule did not encourage voluntary or extra mortifications, as the latter had a “passing and secondary role”. Truran explained that it would be wrong to consider abnegation and negative spirituality as a method or a system. She added that Dame Catherine Gascoigne, in her “Account of Her Prayer”, presented this teaching of Baker very clearly. She explained how she was drawn to a “prayer which tends to a unity without adhering to any particular image or creature, but seeking only for that one thing which our Saviour said to be necessary”. Her spiritual goal was a love

union with God, and this is what moved the soul on her spiritual path and rendered difficulties and aridity easier to overcome. This way the soul could

pass through all occurring difficulties (for the way of love is the way of the cross and full of bitter mortifications), but because she desireth so much to please her beloved that all things whatsoever though never so grievous to nature become easy and tolerable to her [...] She doth pass them over and transcend them by love.

This is what Gertrude More also found. According to Truran, her spiritual journey was thus “a *via vitae*, i.e., a path leading not to mortification, but to a fullness of life, where in the end everything is turned upside down and the difficulties become easy, through the love of Christ and the formation of virtuous habit”. Abnegation thus played a secondary role. Truran finally provided her personal definition of abnegation as “a sharing in the paschal mystery; uniting oneself to the death of Christ, in order to share his resurrection”. Here I think it shows again how abnegation was part of uniting oneself with the suffering and death of Christ: it was not the end, but rather a means to reach life and perfect joy.

## 8.5 Interview 4

Dr Scholastica Susan Jacob was a professed Benedictine nun at Stanbrook Abbey for nearly twenty years, during which time she worked, among other jobs, as an archivist, assistant novice mistress, teacher of Church History, infirmarian, and shepherd. She has since left, and is currently working as project manager developing an Institute for the Study of Anglican Religious Life at St Antony’s Priory, Durham. She was awarded her Doctorate in 2022 at Durham University with a dissertation entitled “From Exile to Exile? Repatriation, Resettlement and the Contemplative Experience of English Benedictine Nuns in England 1795–1887”. In her dissertation, Jacob argued that the English Benedictine nuns’ repatriation after the French Revolution was in fact another sort of exile, as they found themselves “aliens in their native country and refugees from the wider transnational Church” (Jacob 2022: 1). Jacob’s work, by examining their libraries, writings, and devotions, sheds new light on the nuns’ spirituality of the period spanning from 1795 to 1838. She revealed how the nuns relied less on the medieval tradition and on Baker’s spirituality during that time, being rather more

influenced by Catholic Enlightenment thought and Gallicanism (Jacob 2022: 1)—“the belief that the French Church should be free from the ecclesiastical authority of the papacy”.<sup>123</sup>

Given Jacob’s wealth of experience, first as a former Benedictine nun, and second as an archivist and scholar of Benedictine spirituality, I asked her if she found any evidence of Gertrude More’s, Barbara Constable’s, and Catherine Gascoigne’s religious writings’ dissemination and reception in England in the period she studied, namely, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As far as she could tell from her research, although the three nuns were considered “inspirational founder members” of the Benedictine community at Cambrai, there was no evidence that their writings were either read or disseminated in England at that time. More specifically, what she found from the book lists and writings of the community after they returned to their homeland “shows much less reading of the classic English contemplative/mystical writers, especially those recommended by their early spiritual father, Dom Augustine Baker (1575–1641)”. According to Jacob, this was partly due to the disruption that the community experienced from about 1789 to the mid 19th century, but “it also reflects a theological and spiritual shift in the nuns’ devotional reading and practices”, which “became much more influenced by developing French schools of spirituality and more ‘exercise based’ devotions”. Hence, Jacob argues, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Baker’s spiritual teaching remained, but it was less pervasive than in previous years. Nonetheless, she acknowledges that it has had an influence throughout the community’s nearly four-hundred-year history. This offers an interesting perspective on Baker’s legacy, as it shows how his doctrines have not always influenced the spirituality of the Cambrai nuns and their descendant communities in the same way through the centuries.

Referring to evidence of Baker’s ideas about interior liberty in More’s, Constable’s, and Gascoigne’s writings, Jacob confirmed my belief that “they probably prayed deeply with and through his teaching and found through it a way to express their own feelings and deepen their relationship with God”. In other words, she agreed that for More, Constable, and Gascoigne, Baker’s spiritual supervision bore fruit, guiding them toward greater interior freedom, less scrupulosity, and spiritual empowerment. As shown in previous chapters, Jacob also argued that this can be seen in their writings and behaviors. Catherine Gascoigne, for example, defended Baker’s teachings against the accusations of heterodoxy and even threatened to remove her community from the English Benedictine Congregation. In addition, Gertrude More’s inner freedom shows in her total renunciation of self to God before her early death. Finally, Barbara Constable’s mission to copy and disseminate Baker’s

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<sup>123</sup> From: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095841357> Last accessed: 2 August 2022.

works suggests her commitment to his teachings and the integration of them into her own writing. Indeed, at times it is difficult to distinguish where Baker ends, and Constable begins.

I also asked Jacob to what extent she agrees with my idea that More, Constable, and Gascoigne expressed their agency through, rather than despite or against, their religion and if she thinks that their determination and assertiveness in expressing their religious views was influenced by their specific religious national belonging—i.e. English Catholicism versus Roman Catholicism. Jacob confirmed to me that the three nuns expressed their agency very much through their religion and added that they had a true vocation and defended it fiercely: Gascoigne and More in their writing apologetic texts to defend Baker, Gascoigne in challenging the English Benedictine Congregation monks, and Constable in instructing religious men, and her superiors too, which was not usually a woman's role. Regarding their religious national belonging, Jacob considers that they were, first and foremost, English Roman Catholics and their "recusant background made them stronger and more assertive", as their families had to be in order to express their faith in England against persecution. Once they entered convents on the Continent, they were protected in a "little England", in which English customs prevailed. "But they were also part of the Transnational Catholic church and very aware of that." In other words, they felt very much part of Roman Catholicism and, as demonstrated in previous chapters, they contributed with their writings to the preservation and dissemination of that religious tradition. Jacob also explained that "[t]he Recusant Catholics (and English Catholics today) are very much Roman Catholics". She thinks that "it could be a bit misleading to suggest they were English as opposed to Roman Catholics as their continued allegiance to Roman authority was part of the problem of the Reformation in England". In my opinion, this is a very interesting element in our analysis of More's, Constable's, and Gascoigne's spirituality because it shows how "Englishness" did not represent for them an element of discontinuity with Roman Catholicism, but rather was very much part of this spiritual tradition.

The final question I asked Jacob concerned the Cambrai nuns' mysticism. I wanted to understand how she interpreted it, from the perspective of her studies. She confirmed to me it was a "more deep, silent contemplative prayer: i.e., apophatic, interior rather than mysticism in the modern sense of seeing visions etc." The latter were in fact highly discouraged in the Benedictine tradition. We come back here to the idea of apophatic mysticism, outlined in previous chapters, which characterized the Cambrai nuns' spirituality, namely, an experience of inner union with God, which had nothing to do with extraordinary bodily manifestations, such as visions or ecstasies, but which was unintelligible and inexpressible.

## 8.6 Conclusion

These four interviews with sisters Laurentia Johns, Philippa Edwards, and Margaret Truran, and with Dr. Scholastica Susan Jacob, proved the continuing influence of Fr Baker's teachings on the descendant community of Cambrai at Stanbrook. Fr Baker's teachings were revealed in different aspects of the nuns' religious and communal life, namely the principle of inner freedom, affective prayer, the primacy of love over rules, reading, and contemplative practices. The interviewees offered their own interpretation of Baker's ideas, and described their personal experiences. Sister Philippa Edwards, for example, admitted that "Fr Baker's influence is still very strong" at Stanbrook today, although for her "the Rule of St Benedict, [...] is more of an influence than Fr Baker". This shows how his doctrines were not received as an end in themselves, but rather as a means to better accomplish the Rule. Edwards also acknowledged that some nuns are more attracted to Baker's texts than others, but novice mistresses "have guided their novices in Fr Baker's method of simple affective prayer", showing the lasting influence of his spiritual course on today's noviciate. In addition, Dr. Scholastica Susan Jacob, who in her dissertation shed new light on the Cambrai nuns' spirituality from 1795 to 1838, revealed how, at that time, the nuns relied less on the medieval tradition and Baker's spirituality, being instead rather more influenced by Catholic Enlightenment thought and Gallicanism. Hence, her research can help us to understand how the influence of Fr Baker's spirituality on the Benedictine community of Cambrai has changed throughout the years.

The fact that Baker's ideas resonate and remain valid to this day at Stanbrook in a post-Vatican II context does prove, in my view, how problematic they might have sounded in the seventeenth century—especially the theory of "inner freedom", which placed the interior call above any form of external guidance. Yet, as already stated, the principle of inner freedom was not Baker's innovation. Rather, it was grounded in the teachings of the Fathers of the Church. Nonetheless, it clashed with the post-Trent atmosphere of fear and control over women's spirituality. This again proves how liberating and empowering the spiritual guidance of Baker was for the Cambrai nuns, as he was not tying the nuns to himself, instead orientating them toward God, through love. Therefore, I think More, Gascoigne, and Constable fought to defend his ideas and took great risks for him because they felt spiritually empowered by him. In other words, Baker allowed them to express their agency, not against their religion, but through it, ultimately leading them toward greater happiness and self-fulfillment.

I would say that Baker's ideas about affective prayer, obedience to superiors, and the male spiritual direction of women are still a source of spiritual empowerment for the nuns at Stanbrook today as, although the context of post-Vatican II is different from the post-Trent age, the role of women in today's Catholic Church is still not equal to that of men. Hence, in my opinion, women



still run the risk of being overlooked or tied to the male spiritual director's will or, at the very least, to be over-dependent upon it. Baker always tried to liberate women, instead of tying them to himself. He did so by helping them discern and follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit, instead of by imposing his vision or will on their spiritual life. In my own experience, and given the position of Catholic women in the post-Vatican II Church, these ideas remain quite rare, but if they were observed, they would be a powerful means for women to express their agency and to grow in their relationship of love with God, ultimately reaching maturity of faith, freedom, and personal fulfillment.

## 9 Conclusions

It was shown in previous chapters that Gertrude More's, Barbara Constable's, and Catherine Gascoigne's agentic capacity was exercised through, rather than despite, their religious belonging. On the one hand, they rejected blind obedience to domineering superiors—albeit strictly observing the Rule and their religious vows—while on the other hand, by building on medieval and contemporary contemplative life teachings, they developed their own mystical path. They expressed both forms of agency with a rejection of the authority to teach and to instruct, and via the use of self-depreciatory language, typical of female submissive language conventions (Goodrich 2019).

In that which follows, I draw my conclusions, exploring possible connections between these two ways of expressing religious agency, and by deepening and blending the religious perspectives of these remarkable women with that of Fr Baker. This last aspect was further explored through the four interviews with Sr. Laurentia Johns, Sr. Philippa Edwards, Sr. Margaret Truran, and Dr. Scholastica Susan Jacob, which were analyzed in the final chapter of this dissertation. These interviews prove the enduring influence of Fr Baker's teachings on today's descendant community of Cambrai at Stanbrook and offered another perspective on the blending of Baker's ideas with those of post-Vatican II women religious. More specifically, the four interviewees underlined how Baker's teachings regarding interior freedom, affective prayer, and obedience to superiors continue to resonate, both in their noviciate, and in their personal and communal lives.

Following Trent, the office of male spiritual guides acquired a pivotal role for women religious, since they acted as mediators of God's will for the nuns, who followed their spiritual guidance as part of their obedience vow to superiors. As Patricia Ranft (1994) wrote, superiors were considered "God's representatives on earth" and "instruments through which God channeled grace and forgiveness" (24). Nuns were discouraged from approaching any spiritual exercises without supervision, "since, despite their good intentions, the outcome was likely to be blighted by their flawed nature" (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 237). For instance, in spiritual reading, they could be misguided by their fancy and excess of curiosity. Hence, clerical guidance was perceived as crucial to the spiritual progress of women religious (Bowden and Kelly 2013: 237). At the same time, however, Ranft (1994) demonstrated how in the counter-reformation period, the confessor-spiritual director relationship "created an environment in which women gradually became more aware of their potential and more aggressive in promoting their own worth" (25–26), as they started to choose the most compatible directors for them and wittingly manipulated these relationships to accomplish what they felt was their call. In this way, they "had on opportunity to control the controller, by choosing the controller" (Ranft 1994: 18).

Jaime Goodrich and Victoria Van Hyning added that another way in which women benefitted from the confessor-spiritual director relationship was via the legitimization of their own writing they received from them, as part of a longer tradition of religious *mise en texte* and confessional writing.<sup>124</sup> According to Ranft (1994), Teresa of Avila exemplified both situations: she produced her texts as an act of obedience to her directors, but she always defended the right of women to change their spiritual director until they found the most suitable for them and underlined the importance for the director to be learned. In *Revelations*, she named at least nineteen different confessors (Ranft 1994: 21). Moreover, she managed to manipulate them through what Alison Weber called “a rhetoric of femininity” (Weber 1990, cited in Ranft 1994: 22)—in other words, through the use of self-depreciatory and submissive language. Other women religious leaders of the sixteenth- and seventeenth century who strived to defend such liberty were Jane Frances de Chantal, Louise de Marillac, Ana de San Bartolomé, Angela Merici, Madame Acarie, Angélique Arnauld, and Mary Ward, all of whom fought to extend their areas of activity, transcending the gender-based restrictions prevalent at that time. This they achieved whilst still acknowledging formal obedience to their spiritual director (Ranft 1994: 21). In other words, the latter became the male sponsor these women needed to gain both protection and authorization for their activities.

Simultaneously, however, their directors preserved the hierarchy of the clergy through the penitential system. Thus, both had something to gain (Ranft 1994: 20). Ranft (1994), following John Bossy’s warning against interpreting the religious out of context, contended, however, that “neither used unfair or insidious means to control the other” (24), as the “clergy considered themselves instruments through which God channeled grace and forgiveness, not as males reigning over subservient women” (24).<sup>125</sup> Jane Frances de Chantal and Teresa of Avila in fact always showed their directors great respect, as they perceived they were honoring God through their obedience to them (Ranft 1994: 24). This, however, does not preclude the possibility that some directors may have abused their power and that some women were naïve or unaware of the restrictions gender imposed on them.

Considering Baker’s ideas about the spiritual direction of women religious outlined in previous chapters, I argued that More, Constable, and Gascoigne achieved spiritual independence thanks to his spiritual guidance and managed to “push back against what they viewed as Tridentine overreach in terms of authority” (Kelly 2020: 15).<sup>126</sup> Although Baker and his contemporaries never

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<sup>124</sup> Goodrich, Jaime, “Mise en texte in early modern English Benedictine convents”; and Van Hyning, Victoria, “Mise en Texte in the Conversion Narrative of Catherine Holland”, speeches delivered on Monday 24 January 2022, 15.30–17.30 GMT in the context of the The Britain 17–18 seminar (LERMA, UR 853, Aix-Marseille University), convened by Professor Laurence Lux-Sterritt.

<sup>125</sup> See also Bossy (1991: 268, 270, 278).

<sup>126</sup> See also Lay (2011).

hid their ideas about the weaker nature of women and the consequent need to monitor them in their religious readings as well as in their religious practices, he provided them with extensive reading lists, which permitted a serious erudition in matters of prayer and contemplation and, in doing so, placed them in continuity with the medieval and contemporary English Catholic contemplative ideals and the transnational tradition of simple affective prayer. Moreover, he encouraged the nuns who sought his guidance to follow their interior call and disposition, and he rejected Jesuit spiritual exercises, which were in use in the convent before his arrival, but which did not procure much benefit to the nuns. Baker suggested passive contemplation practices through simple affective prayer, instead (Goodrich 2021: 75).

Although it is true that in so doing, Baker had the chance to prove the validity of his teachings regarding the spiritual direction of women and passive contemplation itself, I also think his spiritual guidance was an empowering force for the nuns, leading to their inner freedom and spiritual independence. Indeed, rather than tying them to him or to any other male minister or authority, they were encouraged to follow their interior disposition and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The latter was considered by Baker to be the only true spiritual guide. Yet, although these ideas caused substantial controversy at Cambrai at the time, they cannot be considered original, since the concept of interior liberty could be found already in St. John, St. Paul, and St. Augustine, as well as in the tradition from which Baker wrote (Higgins 1963: 158, 192). The end of interior liberty proposed by Augustine is “the fulfilment of the soul's movement toward Beatitude and the final enjoyment of God. The life of the Christian, then, in Baker is a progressive liberation under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (Higgins 1963: 174). This would bring peace and rest to the soul, and would also result in obedience and submission to external authorities, as the latter should help discern the call of God and not substitute themselves to Him.

In chapter 2, paragraph 2.2.9, I argued that the discussion about a specific form of religious women's mysticism started by Caroline Walker Bynum should be enriched with the recognition of the diversity of women's calls to religious life. Bynum, Bruneau, Hollywood, and Jantzen all seem to be searching for a specific form of religious women's mysticism. They asked themselves if there was a female spiritual language and, if so, what form such a specifically female way of relating with God might take. As Ranft (1998) demonstrated in “Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe”, the history of Catholicism teaches that women have been extremely creative in following their interior call: alongside those whose mysticism was more cataphatic and somatic—such as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila—there were others who, as Hollywood (2004) pointed out, developed a more speculative and anti-visionary spirituality—think here of the Beguines of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. I therefore contend that it is not a matter of an intellectual, more

elevated spirituality, or indeed of some affective less-elevated spirituality, where the former is typically associated with the male and the former with the female, but rather of a diversity of calls that women felt and in which they found fulfilment. This is what I would define as a “third way” of interpreting religious women’s mysticism. However, in this dissertation, I did not aim to present an alternative to this binary characterization of male versus female spirituality as such. Rather, I sought to explore the spiritual relationship between the nuns and their male spiritual director in the light of the ongoing discussion of current agency conceptions in feminist approaches. As a consequence, I have concluded that this dual typology—intellective versus affective—from the perspective of this research, seems profoundly inadequate.

Augustine Baker authorized the three nuns’ contemplative paths by inscribing them in a precise Pre-Reformation English mystical tradition. Simultaneously, however, these women left a testimony of their personal satisfaction in following the spiritual path he suggested, and they proved able to manipulate the tradition in which they were instructed by selecting those elements that resonated best with their experience. This way, I believe they expressed their agency through their religion as, under formal obedience to a spiritual director, whom they chose themselves, they found the spiritual path that best suited them. The latter consisted of a combination of affective piety, the apophatic tradition, and negative theology, and in a creative use of Biblical language and imagery to focus on love and nourishment instead of pain and self-sacrifice.

The emphasis Gascoigne, More, and Constable placed in their writings on the criticism of domineering spiritual guides thus acquires a clearer function: they wanted to defend the right of women religious to search for the most appropriate director, as he was the only legitimate sponsor to authorize both their spirituality and their writings (Ranft 1994: 20). Indeed, when Baker was accused of heterodox doctrines, More and Gascoigne were asked to submit the descriptions of their prayer methods to the General Chapter of the Benedictine Order, and they took the chance to clarify that his spirituality, rather than any impediment, was a great aid in better performing their religious duties. In my opinion, this was a strategy they used to allow their voices to be heard, alongside their underlining that Baker never encouraged disobedience to superiors—quite the contrary, he stressed that humility and true obedience, observed out of love for God, were the results of his teachings.

Gertrude More made a clear distinction between true and blind obedience in her Apology and she unmasked those clergymen who exploited the vow of obedience to exercise their power and control over the soul. I would argue that here we see how More blended her views with those of Baker, as she had experienced the negative consequences of having the wrong director and only reached peace and rest upon following Baker. We go back here to Ranft’s (1994) idea that women “had on opportunity to control the controller, by choosing the controller” (18).

As far as Gascoigne is concerned, I believe that not only did she express her agency by strategizing in her letters to preserve Baker's manuscripts from destruction and, as abbess, she was even ready to withdraw her community from the formal jurisdiction of the General Chapter to that end, but she was also faithful to Baker's way of simple, affective prayer as it proved congenial to her, as she testified in *Account of Her Prayer*. In this respect, one could ask to what extent she was simply following external advice, or blending her own perspective with that of Baker. I believe the answer lies in Gascoigne's leaving a testimony of her personal satisfaction in this spiritual course. In other words, she was not merely theorizing about prayer; rather, she was talking about her own experience, and this, in itself, proves that what Baker taught her truly resonated with her, to the point that alongside More, she was prepared to take substantial risks to defend him. It could be said that the role of Gascoigne was perhaps even more interesting than that of More, as she was the then abbess at Cambrai, and thus she was supposed to set a good example to the nuns in terms of obedience and humility toward their superiors. She was, however, a strenuous defender of Baker's spirituality and was not afraid to disobey White's orders when she thought he was abusing his power. In this instance, Gascoigne showed that Baker's doctrines should not be feared, but praised, as they led to the better accomplishment of religious duties and to the acquiring of all those necessary virtues for communal life in the convent.

The case of Barbara Constable is slightly different from those of More and Gascoigne. Although she never met Baker in person, Constable was the primary transcriber of his works and thus played a significant role in ensuring his legacy. Moreover, as we have seen, in her texts we find the same tone and arguments as those of More and Constable regarding obedience to superiors, prayer, and the passive contemplation of God. She also demonstrated the blending of her position with that of Baker by providing extensive commentaries on the sayings of saints and spiritual authorities, which she reported in her manuscripts, to the point that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between her own voice and theirs. As far as mysticism is concerned, like More, Constable wittingly appropriated the erotic imagery of nuptial mysticism and affective piety, in which she was well-read, to stress her personal satisfaction in following passive contemplation through simple affective prayer, combining it with the apophatic tradition and negative theology. In addition, she creatively used Biblical language and imagery to focus on love and nourishment instead of pain and self-sacrifice.

One could finally ask why these three nuns expressed their agency precisely in these two ways—i.e., by rejecting blind obedience to domineering superiors and through their mystical practices. The Benedictine nuns of Cambrai were enclosed contemplatives, meaning they did not choose an active life in the world. Rather, they primarily devoted themselves to prayer—both personal and communal—reading, and scribal activities, such as transcribing manuscripts. I suggest that a

woman could enter a life of enclosure in a monastery, either with or without a true vocation, and live her religious vows in one of two ways: first, by complaining and neglecting her duties—this is what initially happened to Gertrude More before the moment of conversion she experienced after meeting with Baker—or, second, by obeying the Rule and one’s superiors while at the same time remaining true to oneself, to one’s call, and to one’s feelings. I think Baker enabled More, Gascoigne, and Constable to accomplish this second aim. At least, this is the testimony they leave in their writings, and this is what I wanted to make visible in this dissertation: their feelings, internal dispositions and calls, and the means (or in this case, the person) who enabled them to fulfil them.

Furthermore, I argued that they were far from passive in this process. Rather, they wittingly exploited Baker’s guidance for their own benefit, and ultimately some of their personal religious reflections also found public resonance. I think these three women expressed their agency through the choice of language and the tone in their texts, always plain, low, submissive, and never resistant to male clerical hierarchies. Had they rebelled against tyrannizing superiors openly, they would in fact never have had the opportunity to express themselves and being listened to. For this reason, as I argued in the chapter 2, paragraph 2.2.8, the so-called “metaphor of agency”, when applied to religious women, can be misleading because this perspective reveals a way of interpreting religious practices using western secular liberal categories that might be far-removed from the real experiences and goals of women involved in so-called conservative religious traditions (Bracke 2008: 61).

I therefore think that the “compliant models” of religious women’s agency proposed by Avishai, Mahmood, and Bracke offer an interesting perspective from which to interpret the religious experiences of More, Gascoigne, and Constable. Avishai (2008) interpreted the agency of Jewish religious women as an authentic religious conduct, not meant to pursue extra-religious ends, but rather followed in the pursuit of orthodoxy. Saba Mahmood (2001), who studied Muslim women, defined agency as the “space of action that relations of subordination enable and create” (203). Sarah Bracke (2008b) also studied young Muslim women, and contended that their agency consisted in their quest to achieve a higher level of spirituality through great self-discipline. In other words, these three scholars interpreted agency as an authentic religious conduct not meant to pursue extra-religious ends, but rather orthodoxy. Although their analyses focused on the contemporary age and regarded western as well as non-western religious traditions, whereas this research focuses on seventeenth-century English Benedictine nuns, I showed how their perspectives could also be applied to the religious experience of More, Gascoigne, and Constable, as these women expressed their agency not against or despite, but rather through their religious belonging. On the one hand, they expressed anti-authoritarian ideas using the *topos* of the “poor little woman” (Bynum 1987: 292), while, on the other hand, they built on their spiritual director’s contemplative life teachings, through which they affirmed

their own mysticism. More specifically, they combined affective piety with apophatic tradition and negative theology, and in doing so, they made creative use of Biblical language and imagery to focus on love and nourishment instead of pain and self-sacrifice.

I believe that further research into the writings of early modern English Catholic nuns, through a feminist perspective on religious women's agency and mysticism, could lead to further promising and interesting outcomes in this field of study and to a better understanding of these and other women's spirituality.



## 10 Appendix

This section provides the complete versions of the four interviews. The questions were the same for all three interviews, but interview four. The first interview follows a standard question and answer format, while the second interview was structured by the interviewee as a self-contained text, and is thus presented as such. In the third and fourth interviews, I use italics to distinguish the answers from the questions. Both questions and answers were conducted in English in all interviews.

### 10.1 Interview 1

First, I would like to kindly ask you to briefly introduce yourself and to possibly explain your connection with the Benedictine community of Stanbrook.

*I am Sr Laurentia Johns and have been in the Stanbrook community since 1990. I have served the community in various roles including Novice Mistress and Kitchener. My current roles include looking after our Oblates and our holiday homes business as well as literary work.*

This interview aims at deepening Augustine Baker's ideas about the spiritual direction of women religious and about his mysticism to understand possible traces of his spirituality in your and your community's contemplative life. Do you personally believe there is a continuing influence of Baker's spirituality today in your community? If so, how?

*Yes, I believe there is a continuing influence. One of the ways this shows is in the rich variety of personalities in the community, each nun is unique and very much herself, while clearly part of the Stanbrook family. Another piece of evidence for a strong Baker influence is, I would say, the depth of charity in the community—fruit of the love of God poured into the heart by the Holy Spirit, especially in prayer.*

In “Of an External Director”, a chapter in Baker's *Holy Wisdom*, he distinguishes the role of the spiritual director from that of the confessor, which is only to hear the penitent's faults and give absolution. In Baker's understanding, the spiritual director should provide general guiding principles one could apply him/herself. He therefore discouraged dependence on the spiritual director since “God will be the faithful counsellor” and He alone “is our only master and director” (*Holy Wisdom or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation*, 1876: 73–86, cited in Leclercq 1987: 60). Baker's ideas raised a big controversy at Cambrai at the time, but they cannot be considered as original, since the concept of interior liberty could be found already in St. John, St. Paul, and St. Augustine, as well as in the tradition from which Baker wrote (Higgins 1963: 158, 192). The end of interior liberty proposed by Augustine is “the fulfilment of the soul's movement toward Beatitude and the final

enjoyment of God. The life of the Christian, then, in Baker is a progressive liberation under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (Higgins 1963: 174). Why do you think Baker and his ideas were, during his lifetime, subject to such strong opposition? Do you think this concept of inner freedom still has an influence today in your community? If so, how? How do you personally understand and live the concept of interior liberty?

*I think it is often difficult for those in authority when people claim to have an inner authority from the Spirit—a so-called “hot-line to God”. Think of the Montanist heresy in the early Church. But Baker insisted that the nuns should obey superiors and the Rule of St Benedict in all things while exercising discretion—a key monastic virtue. Yes, I think inner freedom is still very important, and apparent, in the Stanbrook community which always privileges people and charity above rules and regulations. There is a certain sense of spaciousness in the community; a breadth and a depth, a lack of all that is narrow and constrained, so you feel you can breathe and be yourself. This sense surely comes from the spiritual life of each member. For me, inner freedom means not having to follow the majority if my conscience dictates a different path. It gives me freedom to speak out candidly. Liberty of spirit frees one up from seeking approval or recrimination; frees one up to love. In this it is close to purity of heart, I think.*

The type of prayer that Baker found particularly useful for women in general, and for nuns of contemplative orders in particular, was the so-called “prayer of sensible affection” (Baker 2002: xxxviii, 72). Could you briefly describe your daily prayer routine? How do you personally pray? Do love and affection have an impact on your prayer method?

*2 half-hours of personal prayer a day, one in the morning one in the evening. Mass and Divine Office in church with the community 6 times a day.*

*By becoming still and silent and so tuning into God’s presence and trying to be totally present to him.*

*Of course!*

Baker taught Gertrude More not to be “daunted with [...] sins” (Apology 24) and did not ask her to confess more than was necessary to her spiritual progress since all would turn to her good if she tended to God by prayer and renounce “al inordinate affections to created things” (Apology 24). Could you please describe how you approach the Sacrament of Confession? How does the primacy of the love for God impact on your approach to this Sacrament?

*With confidence in God’s love and mercy.*

As Dorothy Latz (1997) underlined, Baker “established a veritable atelier at Our Lady of Consolation at Cambrai, where the English Benedictine nuns translated, copied, collected, and were inspired to imitate medieval and 16–17th century spiritual and mystical writings” (15). In addition,

Baker composed numerous treatises, advice books, and prayer manuals himself to enrich and enlarge the convent's library (Walker 2004: 240). How much time do you and your community devote to spiritual reading? What texts do you privilege? Are there lay and women authors among the ones you read? If so, who are they?

*At least 30 mins a day.*

*Scripture, Patristic authors, the Mystics.*

*Our own foundresses (Dames Catherine Gascoigne, Gertrude More, Margaret Gascoigne) Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, the 2 Teresas [Teresa of Àvila and Thérèse of Lisieux], Adrienne Von Speyr, Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Caryll Houselander, Evelyn Underhill. Also our own contemporary authors: Dame Felicitas Corrigan, Dame Maria Boulding, Dame Anne Field.*

Spiritual reading was also the first of the three stages of mental prayer that Baker identified and taught. The second stage was active contemplation, also called “spiritual aspirations” or “spiritual elevations”. The third and last step was passive contemplation—that is, mystic union (Walker 2004: 139). Mystic union was understood by Baker as an abstraction from materiality and the bodily senses to achieve a direct affective and spiritual contact with God, and it was Him who conceded this special grace and favour to the soul (More 2009: xii–xiii). “This phase involved using the previous steps to show how “God was to be contemplated ‘about all images and formes” (Wolfe 2004: 140). As David Lunn (1975) writes, “strictly speaking, mysticism is the union of the soul with God, or the ultimate stages in the search of it, using self-denial and the prayer of contemplation for its attainment” (267). Discursive prayer or meditation, which is rooted in the intellect and in the imagination, is preparatory for contemplation itself. Gertrude More believed and acted “on the principle that contemplation is the normal means of approaching God in prayer for all Christians, not the exclusive privilege of a few specially gifted souls” (Norman 1976: 208). Although Baker fits her progress into “stations” (Norman 1976: 206), “roughly corresponding to the traditional divisions into purgative, illuminative and mystical ways, Gertrude herself uses no such terms” (Norman 1976: 206). “[T]o her only two things matter: faith and love” (Norman 1976: 206). Could you please provide your definition of mysticism and of mystic union with God? Have you ever experienced it? If so, how would you describe it?

*I think mysticism needs to be seen within the context of Christ's Paschal Mystery which gives the baptised access through Christ to God. Mysticism to me involves an unmediated sense of God's presence to a certain degree though if we believe as poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, that “the world is charged with the glory of God” (“God's Grandeur”), even apparently unmediated touches of God, say through the beauties of nature, are actually charged with his presence and so are mediated by his Holy Spirit which is also the spirit of Christ. I would prefer not to speak of my own*

*experience of prayer but am happy to sign up to what Dame Gertrude More and Dame Catherine Gascoigne have written. It seems both nuns wrote accounts of their prayer in response to a request from the EBC General Chapter. D. Catherine's is much the shorter and includes the following words: "[Prayer for me is] the search for that one thing which our Saviour said to be necessary and which contains all things in itself—my God, to whom to adhere and to inhere is a good thing." Jacob Riyeff has produced a copy of D. Gertrude's "Apology" which gives an idea of her prayer. See Poems and Counsels on Prayer and Contemplation by Dame Gertrude More, edited and introduced by Jacob Riyeff. Pub. Gracewing, March 2020.*

Gertrude More "belonged to a tradition of mystical writers who believed in the value of the *via negativa*, i.e. a path to union with God through total self-abnegation and the emptying of the mind of set ideas and images" (More 2009: 13). Abnegation consists, as the Imitation of Christ teaches, in finding joy and fulfilment in God alone and in renouncing all earthly inordinate affections for creatures, but also, for oneself. In More's understanding, abnegation means giving her heart, mind, body, and soul entirely to God, without retaining anything for herself or for other creatures, so that God could accomplish His will in her. In other words, she must empty herself to be replenished with God's presence and grace. Does the principle of abnegation still have a relevance today in your spiritual life? If so, how? How do you personally interpret it?

*Yes! I tend to think of "abnegation" as "mortification", a term used by Fr Baker and which resonates with that "death" of the old self of which St Paul speaks in for example Colossians 3. That death is in order to share in the resurrected life of the Risen Christ. Every renunciation is an annunciation of this new life. So we are back to the Paschal Mystery.*

How do you personally adapt/understand the teachings of Baker in your contemplative life? Do you think Fr Baker's teachings contribute to you exercising your agency through your religious belonging? If so, how? If not, why?

*Fr Baker taught "liberty of spirit" but in this he was only teaching what we find in St Paul as basic Christian doctrine. For example "...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty", 2 Cor. 3:17.*

## 10.2 Interview 2

I have been at Stanbrook since October 1970. At present I am guest mistress and librarian—though without a guest house or a library—and I do some spiritual direction and some cooking. Before we moved from old Stanbrook in Worcestershire I was in charge of the guest house for several years, and assistant librarian for many years, which included putting our whole library onto a database and of course packing all the books—many of which are still in boxes either at Buckfast Abbey in Devon or here. When I was younger I also worked in the kitchen and in the infirmary. After I did a course in spiritual direction that became my principal work for some years before we moved and I left all my directees behind. I believe that Fr Baker’s influence is still very strong in our community; some nuns are more attracted to his writings than others of course, but I’m pretty sure that all our novice mistresses have guided their novices in Fr Baker’s method of simple affective prayer.

Reason for the strong contemporary opposition to Fr Baker’s teaching? I guess that this is because of the human tendency to prefer strict rules to the liberty of spirit advocated by Fr Baker.

Our community still has a strong spirit of inner freedom which can verge on individualism.<sup>127</sup> One of the ways I experience this myself is that I believe ardently in relationships of equality, with religious superiors, friends, acquaintances; I have a strong aversion to being dominated by anybody, and no desire to dominate anybody else.

My daily prayer routine: My favourite prayer time is between Vigils and Lauds every morning—that is at least half an hour and can be quite a bit longer. The half hour in the afternoon or evening varies depending on other appointments and tends to be much more distracted.

How do I pray? Perhaps the first word that comes to mind is self-offering, trying to give my entire self to God holding nothing back. I gaze at the big Crucifix in our church and consciously unite my self-offering with that of Jesus on the Cross and in the Mass. I find phrases from the psalms often come to mind or simply the words “God, I love you” or the name of Jesus or ABBA, Father. I find that consciously listening even with my physical ears, as if straining to hear distant music is a help to inner stillness. Exterior silence is the greatest help with this. I do find it difficult if other people in the church cough or turn the pages of a book.

Confession? I find it difficult! When I was young I found it difficult to admit to being sinful; then I realized that repentance is the key to joy (“Repent and believe the good news!”). But even now

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<sup>127</sup> I asked for clarification on this point and Edwards replied as follows: “I’ve given thought to this question and realized that while I stand by my statement that the Stanbrook community has a strong spirit of inner freedom, the negative signs I’ve noticed of what I’d call individualism rather than freedom were mostly quite a long time ago in people who are now dead or have left the monastery.” Here follow some examples that Edwards provided: wearing the belt round hips rather than waist, as it was usual, changing the sequence of lines in the psalmody to avoid singing with the rest of the community, and taking extra time for prayer while the rest of the nuns were at Vespers. From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Philippa Edwards, dated 22 March 2022.

I find it hard to identify specific sins, times when I have deliberately offended God. I try to identify something recent with the help of the Scripture readings at Mass or something else I've read or heard recently. I believe God speaks to me/us in all the details of my life. Rules and regulations don't feature at all when I examine my conscience before Confession.

Spiritual reading? My novice mistress really loved the Bible and tried very hard to inculcate in me a similar love, but I find it very difficult to read, let alone study the Bible. Lots of parts appeal to me but I find it difficult to "stay with" them. I do try every day to read beforehand the Mass readings and to ask the Lord what he is saying to me through them.

I find secular authors easier to read, on the whole, than specifically spiritual ones! Yes, women, lay, no problem. Poetry, plays, literary criticism, biography, travel, etc. I am often given books, not necessarily ones I would have chosen, and feel obliged to at least begin if not finish them.

Scripture commentaries I find extremely difficult to grapple with but I have recently been directed to a lively young American Scripture scholar, Cynthia Parker, who teaches online in a very engaging manner.

Partly because of trouble with my eyes I find I much prefer listening to reading.

My definition of mysticism: Faithful loving, not dependent on mystical experiences. I have had moments, chunks of time, of intense and blissful silence which I would almost describe as ecstatic but they are unusual.

Abnegation? Yes, definitely, very relevant. Self-emptying is a big part of self-offering, and I believe firmly that I need to be hollowed out in order to be open to God's love and life flowing into me. I know very well that my own gratifying my own self-will is not the way to happiness and that God's plans for me are much better than my own could ever be.

I must admit it's quite a time since I've read or studied Fr Baker, except for choosing a beautiful extract from *The Spirituall Anker* for a recent Office of the Dead; the extract where he uses the image of the compass whose needle constantly hovers near true North to show that the mind and heart should constantly be set on the One we love.

I regard obedience as [a] way of expressing love in action, that is love of God, of the abbess and also other members of the community, and indeed everyone who crosses my path. I've probably already said that I believe all human relationships work only on a level of equality, even if one of the parties is an abbess or a bishop or whatever. I have no wish to be dominated by anybody or on the other hand to dominate myself. Speaking the truth in love (St Paul's letter to the Ephesians and also the Rule of St Benedict) is the ideal at all times and in all circumstances.

### 10. 3 Interview 3

First, I would like to kindly ask you to briefly introduce yourself and to possibly explain your connection with the Benedictine community of Stanbrook.

*Sr Margaret Truran, for 33 years a nun of the Stanbrook Abbey, the community formerly at Cambrai, for whom Father Augustine Baker wrote so many of his treatises. When the community moved in 2009 to the north of England, for reasons of health I transferred to the Benedictine monastery of Santa Cecilia, Rome. For many years I was archivist and novice mistress at Stanbrook, and served on the History Commission of the English Benedictine Congregation. I have contributed the following articles and chapters on Father Baker and his legacy:*

1) “True Christian Amazons?” *Downside Review*, no. 400 (July 1997), pp 157–80.

2) “Dom Augustine Baker (1575–1641), ‘That Mysterious Man, Whose secret Life and publish’d Writings prove, To pray is not to talke, or thinke, but Love’”, *Stanbrook Abbey website* <<https://www.stanbrookabbey.org.uk/page-ourroots.html>>

3) “‘The Present Author Hath Bin Driven to This’: what needs was Father Baker trying to meet?” in *That Mysterious Man: Essays on Augustine Baker 1575–1641*, ed. Michael Woodward, *Analecta Cartusiana series*, volume 119:15 (Salzburg/Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2001), pp 70–81.

4) “Two extracts from the writings of Blossius in *The Upholland Anthology*” in “Stand Up to Godwards”: *Essays in Mystical and Monastic Theology in Honour of the Reverend John Clark on his sixty-fifth birthday*, ed. James Hogg, *Analecta Cartusiana* 204 (University of Salzburg 2002), pp 157–61.

5) “Lamspringe Spirituality: Father Baker’s legacy” in *Lamspringe: An English Abbey in Germany*, ed. Anselm Cramer OSB, *St Laurence Papers VII* (Ampleforth Abbey, 2004), pp 83–95 & 206.

6) *Review of Five Treatises; The Life and Death of Dame Margaret Gascoigne; Treatise of Confession by Fr. Augustine Baker O.S.B.*, ed. Dr John Clark, *Analecta Cartusiana* 119:23 (University of Salzburg, 2006). *Recusant History*, October 2008, pp 282–86.

7) “Did Father Baker compile the first Constitutions of the English Benedictine nuns at Cambrai?”, in *Dom Augustine Baker 1575–1641*, ed. Geoffrey Scott (Leominster: Gracewing, 2012), pp 31–42.

This interview aims at deepening Augustine Baker's ideas about the spiritual direction of women religious and about his mysticism to understand possible traces of his spirituality in your and your community’s contemplative life. Do you personally believe there is a continuing influence of Baker’s spirituality today in your community? If so, how?

*His spirituality undoubtedly continues to have a formative influence in the Stanbrook community. In the timetable, in its spirituality, in characteristic breadth of mind and discretion, and in the literary work undertaken by members of the community:*

*a) The timetable*

*An unusual feature is the second half-hour of private prayer prescribed on the daily timetable, just as Fr Baker laid down for the Cambrai foundresses and for the first Constitutions of the community.*

*b) Spirituality*

*Baker's teaching on prayer continues to be followed in the noviciate: guidance is given for the formation of good habits, but the direction of what is essentially a personal relationship in prayer is left to the Holy Spirit.*

*c) Breadth of mind, discretion and avoidance of scruples*

*Chapter 55 of the Rule of St Benedict, on clothing and footwear, lists the items a monk can expect to have at hand for his use, including a needle. As Baker pointed out, a needle is no use on its own, so thread must also be permitted.*

*At Stanbrook in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Abbesses Caecilia Heywood and Laurentia McLachlan were famous for the mutual trust they instilled in the community. We were instructed that, if the Abbess was not available to give a permission and the matter was urgent, we should use our common sense and go ahead, then explain afterwards.*

*d) Literary work*

*Among those I have known since I entered the Stanbrook community in 1976:*

*Dame Felicitas Corrigan was the author of *In a Great Tradition by the Benedictines of Stanbrook* (1956), which carries a fine chapter on Fr Baker, DD Catherine Gascoigne and Gertrude More.*

*Dame Bede Foord contributed "Dame Gertrude More and Sir Thomas", *Moreana*, no. 14, 1967, pp 109–111, 114.*

*To mark the 1500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St Benedict's birth, several of the community worked in 1980 on a Baker manuscript, transcribed, edited and printed by hand: *The Substance of the Rule of St Bennet* (Worcester: Stanbrook Abbey 1981).*

*Incidentally two postulants at their clothing in 1981 asked to receive the names Catherine and Helen (Dame Gertrude More's baptismal name; there was a Dame Gertrude in the Stanbrook community at the time), echoing the names of the community's foundresses.*



*Dame Frideswide Sandeman, "Dame Gertrude More" in Benedict's Disciples, ed. D. H. Farmer (Leominster: Fowler Wright, 1980; 2nd edition Gracewing/ Fowler Wright, 1995).*

*In 1997 the community arranged for the script to be published as a separate booklet.*

*To mark her golden jubilee, a moment of thanksgiving to God for 50 years in monastic life, Dame Anne Field produced an edition of Dame Catherine Gascoigne's account of her prayer, a seminal work of Baker spirituality, and gave a copy to each member of the Stanbrook community: This One Thing Only: An account of her way of prayer by Dame Catherine Gascoigne (Worcester: Stanbrook Abbey, 1999).*

*Dame Teresa Rodrigues for her golden jubilee two years later gave each member of the community a modernised copy of Baker's Holy Wisdom: The Essence of "Holy Wisdom", Teaching on the Spiritual Life (Worcester: Stanbrook Abbey, 2001).*

*D. Teresa also contributed "This Mysterious Man?" to "Stand Up to Godwards": Essays in Mystical and Monastic Theology in Honour of the Reverend John Clark on his sixty-fifth birthday, ed. James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiana 204 (University of Salzburg 2002)*

*and a chapter, "Mortification in the teaching of Dom Augustine Baker", in Dom Augustine Baker 1575-1641, ed. Geoffrey Scott (Leominster: Gracewing, 2012).*

*Dame Laurentia Johns reviewed That Mysterious Man: Essays on Augustine Baker OSB 1575-1641, ed. Michael Woodward (2001) in The Downside Review (July 2002)*

*and supplied a foreword to Dame Gertrude More's Poems & Counsels on Prayer and Contemplation, ed. Jacob Riyeff (Leominster: Gracewing 2020).*

*See above for D. Margaret Truran's contributions.*

In "Of an External Director", a chapter of Baker's *Holy Wisdom*, he distinguishes the role of the spiritual director from that of the confessor, which is only to hear the penitent's faults and give absolution. In Baker's understanding, the spiritual director should provide general guiding principles one could apply him/herself. He therefore discouraged dependence on the spiritual director since "God will be the faithful counsellor" and He alone "is our only master and director" (*Holy wisdom or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation*, 1876: 73–86, in Leclercq 1987: 60). Baker's ideas raised a big controversy at Cambrai at the time, but they cannot be considered as original since the concept of interior liberty could be found already in St. John, St. Paul, and St. Augustine, as well as in the tradition from which Baker wrote (Higgins 1963: 158, 192). The end of interior liberty proposed by Augustine is "the fulfilment of the soul's movement toward Beatitude and the final enjoyment of God. The life of the Christian, then, in Baker is a progressive liberation under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (Higgins 1963: 174).

Why do you think Baker and his ideas were, during his lifetime, subject to such strong opposition?

*He was rowing against the current of the time. Jesuit spirituality was very popular. A community of English Benedictine nuns had been founded at Brussels in 1598 with the support of Jesuit directors. However they struggled for years over the question of spiritual guidance. Baker recognized that a spirituality that emphasized the use of the imagination and systematic prayer, under spiritual direction, did not suit the needs and circumstances of the Cambrai nuns.*

Do you think this concept of inner freedom still has an influence today in your community? If so, how?

*I can't speak for the last decade. The 1992 Declarations (that is, Constitutions) for the nuns of the English Benedictine Congregation required the novice mistress "to encourage those under her care in humility, self-denial, simplicity and liberty of spirit according to the traditions of our Order".*

How do you personally understand and live the concept on interior liberty?

*I see it as a matter of personal responsibility. Prayer is not a system or a method but the development of a relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, a friendship guided by the gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit in the heart.*

The type of prayer that Baker found particularly useful for women in general, and for nuns of contemplative orders in particular, was the so-called "prayer of sensible affection" (Baker 2002: xxxviii, 72).

Could you briefly describe your daily prayer routine?

*Our "prayer routine" is of two kinds, the Divine Office (the praise and worship of God on behalf of the whole Church) and private prayer. They feed each other and form a habit of prayer that continues throughout the day.*

How do you personally pray?

*In general, prayer takes the form of opening the heart in the presence of our Lord, longing for him, and desiring to do his will and serve him.*

*It can vary according to the hour of the day. After Mass, our Lord's presence after Holy Communion fills the heart in thanksgiving; the needs of others are also often in mind. During the course of the day, it is helpful to lift the mind in prayer for a few moments from time to time; apart from Angelus, the sequence Veni Sancte Spiritus and the hymn Veni Creator Spiritus often come to mind, or a verse from the psalms, especially 118 (119 in bibles). After Compline at night, there is a chance to look back over the day in gratitude [...], but also recognize what needs to be acknowledged or put right.*

Do love and affection have an impact on your prayer method?

*The Divine Office is sung, and singing rises from the heart in love. Similarly personal prayer is a matter of a relationship with God, who is Love.*

Baker taught Gertrude More not to be “daunted with [...] sins” (Apology 24) and did not ask her to confess more than was necessary to her spiritual progress since all would turn to her good if she tended to God by prayer and renounce “al inordinate affections to created things” (Apology 24). Could you please describe how you approach the Sacrament of Confession?

*I try to acknowledge my life in the presence of the Lord, to seek help and healing. The priest is someone who overhears, receives and has the power delegated to free the penitent from one’s sins. It should be simple and natural.*

How does the primacy of the love for God impact on your approach to this Sacrament?

*1) Sorrow, because of what Christ suffered on our behalf in his human nature on account of our sins, and to set us free from them. Also because sins cause suffering to people around one.*

*2) Gratitude, because Christ’s resurrection from death has brought us the gift of adoption as children of God, and given us a new way of life.*

As Dorothy Latz (1997) underlined, Baker “established a veritable atelier at Our Lady of Consolation at Cambrai, where the English Benedictine nuns translated, copied, collected, and were inspired to imitate medieval and 16–17th century spiritual and mystical writings” (15). In addition, Baker composed numerous treatises, advice books, and prayer manuals himself to enrich and enlarge the convent’s library (Walker 2004: 240).

How much time do you and your community devote to spiritual reading?

*A good deal of time. Apart from the readings in the office and reading during mealtimes, a minimum of 30 minutes’ private reading is expected; often it is much more than 30 minutes.*

What texts do you privilege?

*The texts of the sung liturgy, especially of Gregorian chant, are powerfully contemplative and remain in mind during the day: antiphons, psalms, hymns. The biblical and patristic readings of the Divine Office are a strand that nourish the mind in another way.*

*During the day, I look for quality across a broad spectrum of writers, from St Augustine, always a favourite, via the late mediaeval Orthodox writer Nicholas Cabasilas (*The Life in Christ*) to Bishop Erik Varden’s website <https://coramfratribus.com/notebook/>.*

Are there lay and women authors among the ones you read? If so, who are they?

*I don’t consciously distinguish between authors: Esther de Waal, a laywoman, has written very well on the Rule of St Benedict, for example, and her books are among those recommended to novices. For me Dame Julian of Norwich and Dame Laurentia McLachlan stand out among woman writers. Philosophers such as Alasdair McIntyre, or Christopher Dawson for a Catholic*

*philosophical and political outlook, help one to understand the forces underlying contemporary society and politics, though their writings can't always be classed as lectio divina.*

Spiritual reading was also the first of the three stages of mental prayer that Baker identified and taught. The second stage was active contemplation, also called “spiritual aspirations” or “spiritual elevations”. The third and last step was passive contemplation, that is mystic union (Walker 2004: 139). Mystic union was understood by Baker as an abstraction from materiality and the bodily senses to achieve a direct affective and spiritual contact with God, and it was Him who conceded this special grace and favor to the soul (More 2009: xii–xiii). “This phase involved using the previous steps to show how ‘God was to be contemplated ‘aboue all images and formes’” (Wolfe 2004: 140). As David Lunn (1975) writes, “strictly speaking, mysticism is the union of the soul with God, or the ultimate stages in the search of it, using self-denial and the prayer of contemplation for its attainment” (267). Discursive prayer or meditation, which is rooted in the intellect and in the imagination, is preparatory for contemplation itself. Gertrude More believed and acted “on the principle that contemplation is the normal means of approaching God in prayer for all Christians, not the exclusive privilege of a few specially gifted souls” (Norman 1976: 208). Although Baker fits her progress into “stations” (Norman 1976: 206), “roughly corresponding to the traditional divisions into purgative, illuminative and mystical ways, Gertrude herself uses no such terms” (Norman 1976: 206). “[T]o her only two things matter: faith and love” (Norman 1976: 206).

Could you please provide your definition of mysticism and of mystic union with God?

*In our own time we tend to speak of “spirituality” and “spiritual”, instead of “mysticism” and “mystic”. Perhaps the “interior life of prayer” says it all. As Marion Norman [1976: 206] states, the interior life is not a matter of measuring stages in progress (an essentially self-centred attitude), but of growth in the love of God and in responsiveness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It is a way open to all. The best definition of “union with God” that I can think of are the words of St John (15:4), “Abide in me, and I in you.”*

Have you ever experienced it? If so, how would you describe it?

*Fr Baker wrote of the “Divin Union”, active and passive: “The expressing of the Qualities of these Unions is not proper for me to undertake. Nor will it availe you to hear much of them. For you will not understand them but by Experience: the which when you are comme to, you will not need to be told by another what it meaneth”, The Substance of the Rule of St Bennet (Worcester: Stanbrook Abbey 1981, p. 3.). I am inclined to agree. There will probably be a sense of deep purification and of unspeakable joy: see the same section in St John’s gospel, 15: 2–3, 11.*

Gertrude More “belonged to a tradition of mystical writers who believed in the value of the *via negativa*—i.e. a path to union with God through total self-abnegation and the emptying of the

mind of set ideas and images” (More 2009: 13). Abnegation consists, as the *Imitation of Christ* teaches, in finding joy and fulfilment in God alone and in renouncing all earthly inordinate affections for creatures, but also, for oneself. In More’s understanding, abnegation means giving her heart, mind, body, and soul entirely to God, without retaining anything for herself or for other creatures, so that God could accomplish His will in her. In other words, she must empty herself to be replenished with God’s presence and grace.

Does the principle of abnegation still have a relevance today in your spiritual life? If so, how?

*It is essential to the spiritual life of a Christian, let alone of a nun. I am a little uneasy, though, about two aspects of the previous paragraph:*

*i) the placing of Dame Gertrude in the mystical tradition of the via negativa, associated e.g. with St John of the Cross and the Dark Night of the Soul. The Rule of St Benedict underlines the difficulties and hardships that novices will encounter, but the journey is described as a via vitae, where in the end everything is turned upside down and the difficulties become easy, through love of Christ and the formation of virtuous habit. D. Gertrude says the same thing in her Confessiones—constantly—that this is what she finds.*

*ii) the use of the word “abnegation”. D. Gertrude and Fr Baker refer to “abnegation” in two senses: a) to describe renunciation of self-will in particular (as opposed to the observance of monastic life in general: see Baker’s Substance of the Rule, 1981 edition, p. 1) and b) sometimes as an alternative to the word “mortification” (see D. Gertrude’s Confessiones Amantis, conf. 31 and 34). “Mortification”, however, is the word usually employed. The word is used today to express a feeling of being humiliated and ashamed. For Baker, it meant the discipline of dying to self. Together with prayer, mortification is the means to reach union with God (Substance, p. 2). It is a necessary means to an end, but not an end in itself. As Fr Baker points out in the same context, St Benedict does not want monks to seek voluntary or extraordinary mortifications.*

*Perhaps it is worth saying a little more on the subject. When Arthur F. Marotti states in Gertrude More. Printed Writings, 1641–1700 (2009) that “Gertrude More belongs to a tradition of mystical writers who believed in the value of the via negativa, a path to union with God by way of total self-abnegation and the emptying of the mind of set ideas and images”, he is right that Dame Gertrude’s approach to spirituality was not that of using the imagination, as in the Ignatian exercises. It is therefore generally assumed that DG belongs to the via negativa, a spirituality that emphasizes the unknowability of God (e.g. The Cloud of Unknowing or St John of the Cross’ Dark Night of the Soul). That makes sense to some degree, but the via negativa can quickly end up in people’s minds as another method or system, alien to Fr Baker’s teaching. He insisted that once the groundwork of prayer had been laid—the acts and aspirations that lead one to “tend towards God” in a relationship*

*of humble love—it was simply important for the person to let God be the guide and to try to respond to his action and promptings in the soul. Cf the doggerel often repeated by Baker’s disciples in various forms:*

*“Observe your call  
That’s all in all”*

*or*

*“Consider your call,  
That’s all in all.”*

*or*

*“Mind your call  
It is all in all.”*

*In Dame Catherine Gascoigne’s account of her prayer, This One Thing Only, she explains how she is drawn to a “prayer which tends to a unity without adhering to any particular image or creature, but seeking only for that one thing which our Saviour said to be necessary”. The exercise of the will in tending to God by love is also an exercise of all the virtues, “for it is the way of humility, of abnegation, of sincere obedience, of perfect submission and subjection to God, and to every creature for his love and according to his good will and pleasure”. The soul is enabled “to pass through all occurring difficulties (for the way of love is the way of the cross and full of bitter mortifications), but because she desireth so much to please her beloved that all things whatsoever though never so grievous to nature become easy and tolerable to her ... She doth pass them over and transcend them by love.”*

*Abnegation and mortifications are there, but they play a passing and secondary role.*

*This approach was exemplified by Dame Laurentia McLachlan. See the last chapter of In a Great Tradition by the Benedictines of Stanbrook (1956), not least pp 298–99 on “freedom of spirit”. As implied there, the legacy of Fr Baker’s teaching, transmitted to the nuns of the community of Our Lady of Consolation, belongs also to the whole English Benedictine Congregation; two monks in the last forty years have written doctoral theses on Fr Baker, and many members of the EBC over the years have contributed to books, reviews and conferences on the same subject.*

*How do you personally interpret it?*

*As a sharing in the paschal mystery; uniting oneself to the death of Christ, in order to share his resurrection. “May we through the cross and death of Christ your Son be brought to the glory of the Resurrection”, in the words of the Angelus.*

#### 10.4 Interview 4

First, I would like to kindly ask you to briefly introduce yourself and, if I may ask, to describe your former position at the Stanbrook monastery.

*I have just been awarded my doctorate at Durham University. My thesis title is: From Exile to Exile? Repatriation, Resettlement and the Contemplative Experience of English Benedictine Nuns in England 1795–1887. I am currently working as project manager developing an Institute for the Study of Anglican Religious Life, at St Antony's Priory, Durham. Before that I was a professed Benedictine nun at Stanbrook Abbey. I was a member of the community for nearly 20 years during which time I worked, among other jobs, as archivist, assistant novice mistress, teacher of Church History, infirmarian and shepherd.*

Did you find any evidence of Gertrude More's, Barbara Constable's, and Catherine Gascoigne's religious writings dissemination and reception in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century? If so/not, what was the reason in your opinion?

*I found very little evidence of actual engagement with the writings of these nuns. They were certainly venerated as inspirational founder members of the community but their writing was not, as far as I can tell, being read or disseminated. This was partly due to the turmoil and disruption the community underwent from c. 1789 to the mid 19th century but it also reflects a theological and spiritual shift in the nuns' devotional reading and practices. During the 18th century they became much more influenced by developing French schools of spirituality and more "exercise based" devotions. Their relationship with the English Benedictine monks, especially of St Edmund's, Paris, exposed them to Catholic Enlightenment thought and teaching which seems to have influenced them[.] I say this tentatively at this stage as more investigation is required. Certainly, all the evidence I have found from their book lists and writings after they returned to England shows much less reading of the classic English contemplative/mystical writers, especially those recommended by their early spiritual father, Dom Augustine Baker (1575–1641).*

You mentioned two versions of Barbara Constable's manuscript "Gemitus Peccatorum". Could please repeat what they are and what are the main differences between them?

*There are two manuscripts: One is at Stanbrook Abbey Archives and the other at Downside Abbey. They are in different hands and the Stanbrook one is definitely Dame Barbara Constable's hand. The Downside text follows the Stanbrook one word for word (as far as I have been able to check) but is written in (probably) an early 19th century hand.*

*The Stanbrook Version is bound in leather (probably in the late 18th or early 19th century. The Stanbrook ms was alienated from the Cambrai convent at some time before the French*

*Revolution (see below for details). Why [/] how? The mystery is yet unsolved but the existence of a second copy of the ms, at Downside Abbey suggests one answer.*

*Inside front cover:*

*“From an affectionate Brother to a still more affectionate Sister, Dame Mary Ann Rayment, 1809.” The date is in a different hand and ink.*

*Above the title:*

*“This book was purchased of a bookseller in New Bond Street London in 1784” in Fr Benedict Rayment’s hand. This date, of course, preceded the disruption of the French Revolution and the community’s expulsion which raises the intriguing questions; when and why did it leave Cambrai; where did it go and how did it turn up in London in 1784?*

*It is not clear whether the date, 1809, refers to the date the manuscript was given to Mary Ann Rayment or, most unlikely, the date it was returned to the Cambrai nuns. The bound ms has been annotated first by Benedict Rayment and later by Dame Scholastica Gregson. Fr Benedict gives a short history of the nuns at Cambrai and speculates on the author’s identity. His comments show that he knew the Cambrai community had then moved to Salford. A mid-twentieth century commentary was also made on it by Dame Scholastica Hebgin.*

*The brother is identified as Fr Benedict Rayment, a secular priest who was based at Burton Constable, Yorkshire[,] for many years, who was a regular benefactor and correspondent with the Cambrai/Salford nuns. His sister was Dame Mary Ann Rayment as a Benedictine nun at Brussels and then Winchester/East Bergholt/Haslemere (WWTN BB147).*

*The Downside Version is in a less good condition and not so well spaced and set out. The text continues in an almost continuous stream. It is less elaborate and does not use red ink or such ornate highlighting etc. It is inscribed in the inside cover as belonging to the library of St Mary’s Abbey, East Bergholt (the community Mary Ann Rayment belonged to). This is the Benedictine community that was founded at Brussels, when it closed its library and archives were sent to Downside Abbey.*

*My theory is that the ms at Stanbrook is Barbara Constable’s original text and the ms at Downside is a copy made from it for the community at Winchester (later East Bergholt) when they gave the original ms back to the Stanbrook community (possibly in 1809).*

*A detailed comparison and analysis between the two mss is something I have planned to do at some stage [...]*

*Do you personally believe there has been/there is a continuing influence of Baker’s spirituality in the Benedictine community of Stanbrook? If so, what?*

*Yes, the Baker spiritual teaching has remained an influence throughout the community’s nearly 400 year history. It has waxed and waned and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries period,*



*was a low point, when it was less pervasive—but the spirit remained. By [sic, my] sense is that it was particularly preserved by the lay-sisters: again this is work in progress, but I have evidence to support this argument.*

And how do you think this has changed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century? If so, how/why?

*See my response to 2) above[.]*

How do you think Baker's doctrines on interior liberty influence More's, Constable's, and Gascoigne's religious ideas and writings?

*I think we can see this clearly in the writings and behavior. Catherine Gascoigne, for example, twice defended his teachings against the attack of the monks and threatened to remove her community from the EBC. Dame Gertrude's inner freedom, which she had to fight against herself for, is clear in her total renunciation of self to God before her early death. Barbara Constable's mission to copy, re-copy and disseminate Baker's works suggests her total commitment to them and integration of his teaching into her own writings. Sometimes it is hard to know where Baker ends and Constable begins.*

Do you think they "blended" their own perspectives with that of Baker's? If so, how?

*I think they probably prayed deeply with and through his teaching and found through it a way to express their own feelings and deepen their relationship with God. I am not sure how far one can separate/identify their individual perspectives [...].*

To what extent do you agree with the idea that More, Constable, and Gascoigne expressed their agency through their religion and not despite or against it?

*Very much through rather than despite. For them, their vocation was everything. They gave a huge personal sacrifice to pursue [sic] it and guarded it fiercely: Gascoigne and More in their standing up to the early formators sent to Cambrai, Gascoigne in her challenges to the EBC monks and Constable in her ability to overcome her physical weakness which is alluded to in places in her works. She also demonstrates this in her treatises for her brothers, priests etc. Not usually a woman's place to instruct religious men.*

Do you think their determination and assertiveness in expressing their religious views was influenced by their specific religious national belonging—i.e. English Catholicism versus Roman Catholicism? If so, how? Could you briefly comment on this issue?

*Firstly, they were English Roman Catholics (as opposed to Anglican Catholics!),<sup>128</sup> I think their Recusant background made them stronger and more assertive: the English families who*

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<sup>128</sup> "The Church of England (Anglican Church) which broke from Rome and became the established church in England, also has a section within it who call themselves 'Anglo-Catholics' although they are not in any way in communion with Rome. It is really a question of terminology and while the description as 'English Catholics' is fine I think it should not suggest that the English Catholics were not also Roman Catholics." From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Scholastica Susan Jacob, dated 19 July 2022.

*remained Catholic in the 16th and 17th centuries had to be really determined in their faith to do so. Once founded in convents on the Continent they were to some extent protected in a “little England” where English customs and reading continued to prevail. But they were also part of the Transnational Catholic church and very aware of that. This is a massive subject—it needs a much longer response to go into it but, in short, yes, their Englishness did make a difference. The Cisalpine developments<sup>129</sup> in England in late 1800s and early 1900s demonstrated this.*

*The Recusant Catholics (and English Catholics today) are very much Roman Catholic. The nuns were always part of the transnational Roman church and this created some of the conflicts of identity they experienced on their return to England. I think it could be a bit misleading to suggest they were English as opposed to Roman Catholics as their continued allegiance to Roman authority was part of the problem of the Reformation in England.*

How would you define the mysticism of the Cambrai nuns?

*It is more deep, silent contemplative prayer: ie, apophatic, interior rather than mysticism in the modern sense of seeing visions etc.*

Could you please provide a definition of mysticism and of mystic union with God according to the Benedictine Rule?

*St Benedict is very prosaic in his Rule. His chapters on prayer are more concerned with the performance of the liturgy than mystical union. See RB 6 and 20.*

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<sup>129</sup> “This is where the Ultramontane versus Cisalpine movements clashed in the late 18th and early 19th century [...]. The Cisalpines were still Roman Catholics but influenced by the Catholic Enlightenment thought and Gallicanism. See Blanchard, Shaun. ‘Neither Cisalpine nor Ultramontane: John Carroll’s Ambivalent Relationship with English Catholicism, 1700–1880’ U.S. Catholic Historian, The Catholic University of America Press, Volume 36, Number 3, Summer 2018, pp. 1–27. Within the nuns’ writing and reading in the early 19th century I found an interesting mixture of both philosophies.” From: personal correspondence (email) with Sister Scholastica Susan Jacob, dated 19 July 2022.

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## Short biography

Debora Barnabè was born in Faenza, Italy on August 7, 1989. In 2011 she obtained her bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Bologna *cum laude*. In 2013 she earned her master's degree in Modern, Comparative and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Bologna *cum laude*. In August 2016 she won the Italian “concorso a cattedra” (D.D.G. n. 106 del 23/2/2016) for teaching English Language and Literature in secondary state schools. She currently teaches at “Liceo Rambaldi Valeriani Alessandro da Imola” in Imola, Italy. In 2018 she started her PhD in Women's and Gender Studies (EDGES) at the University of Bologna, and since 2020 has been affiliated researcher and PhD candidate at the Research Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICON) of the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University. She is part of a double doctoral degree programme between Bologna University and Utrecht University under the supervision of Prof. dr. Anne-Marie Korte, Dr. Eva Midden, Dr. Gino Scatasta and Dr. Gilberta Golinelli. On 2 June 2022 she presented as speaker at “The History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland 2022 conference” which took place at UCD University Club, University College Dublin (Ireland). The title of her intervention was: ““O my God, if I love thee not, I shall never know thee” (Constable 1649: 48): Dame Barbara Constable's original writings from a feminist perspective on religious women's agency and on mysticism and gender”.

## Publications:

Barnabè, D. (2022). ““O that I did truly love! For by love only my soul shall become capable of understanding truth’: Dame Gertrude More's The Spiritual Exercises (1658) From a Feminist Perspective on Religious Women's Agency and on Mysticism and Gender.” *DIVE-IN – An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion*, 2(1), 33–52. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2785-3233/16035>