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978-1-107-03979-7 - Reading and Writing During the Dissolution: Monks, Friars,
and Nuns 1530–1558

Mary C. Erler

Excerpt

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“My dere doghter Venus,” quod Saturne,
 “My cours, that hath so wyde for to turne,
 Hath more power than wot any man ...
 Myn is the ruine of the hye halles,
 The falling of the toures and of the walles ...”
 Chaucer, “Knight’s Tale,” ll. 2453–55, 2463–64

From 1534, when the Act of Supremacy was passed and Henry VIII became head of the English Church, until the end of Mary’s reign in 1558 – approximately a quarter-century – the forms of English religious life evolved in newly complex directions. The frequency with which religious and social positions shifted, the fleeting duration of these positions, the resultant somewhat unfocused nature of personal belief, and the conflicts between friends and family have been widely noticed. In the comprehensiveness of these changes, it may have seemed to many that the planetary power of Saturn, with its destructive and sinister aspect, was in the ascendant.

The complexity of England’s religious situation has made these years intriguing ones for modern scholars. It has stimulated efforts to trace a process of cultural accommodation widely agreed to be subtle, partial, gradual, and often surprising. Ethan Shagan, for instance, has called the Reformation “a piecemeal process in which politics and spiritual change are irrevocably intertwined” and speaks of “the majority who never wholly accepted nor wholly opposed the reformation.”¹ At the heart of these changes stood the country’s professed religious, male and female, all of whose institutional homes had been closed during the five years between 1535 and 1540. Their responses to religious change might be counted as fluid as those of their lay counterparts. For them, too, in Peter Marshall’s words, “formations of religious identity ... were fundamentally dialectical

¹ Ethan H. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 7.

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processes.”² One way of assessing the complexity of this time is to look at their situation, and particularly at their writing and reading.

The starting point of this book has been bibliographical. All of the chapters but one began as bibliographical problems, but I have regularly thought of bibliography as a way of exploring lives – and so in what follows, bibliography finds itself in the service of biography. Both these disciplines, in turn, make their contribution to the social and religious history of a period narrowly outlined but satisfying to examine because of the rich diversity of the material it displays. If it is impossible to delimit a characteristic stance for an English religious in this quarter-century, the accounts that follow are broadly enough based to claim what might be called the authority of the vignette. The religious persons viewed here come from London and the regions and from various kinds of religious life: a friar, an anchorite, a monk, and several nuns. Indeed, the intentional pursuit of both men’s and women’s reading and writing broadens the sense at least of the rather different practical choices available to male and female ex-religious – if it does not differentiate them theologically.

Several written genres have been used: a chronicle, devotional texts, letters. The results are diverse and one of the results of this investigation is to show the variety of stances that English religious espoused at the Reformation and the accommodations that they evolved. Examining their writing and reading under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary provides a vivid sense of the diverse alternatives that monks and nuns shared with their lay brethren during this complex time. Sometimes it is possible to see in the reading and writing of these years hints as to a future direction. Equally compelling, however, is a simple apprehension of the intellectual and social complexity produced by religious change for those most formally affiliated with the institutional church.

Some traces remain of religious men’s and women’s reading in the years just before the dissolution of the monasteries; reading that now might seem questioning, if not controversial. The variety of positions so characteristic of life in the 1530s and after was present as well during the years immediately preceding the dissolution. Famously, the last abbess of Denny, Elizabeth Throckmorton, in 1528 asked the wealthy London merchant Humphrey Monmouth for a copy of William Tyndale’s translation

² Quoted in Ethan H. Shagan (ed.), *Catholics and the “Protestant Nation”: Religious Politics and Identity in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2005), p. 42.

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of Erasmus's *Enchiridion*, which he provided. Monmouth asserted that this best-selling work, which condemned the greed and corruption of the Church and called for a reformed religious life, was orthodox enough, seeing that it was owned by John Fisher and read by Syon's confessor-general.³ Similarly, in 1525 Syon received sixty copies of the *Ymage of Loue*, an attempt from within the church to re-think the use of images, written by Observant Franciscan friar John Ryckes. Like Erasmus's work, it inveighed against external forms and emphasized the centrality of scripture – though it cautioned “we may not leave off the honourable and devout customs and holy ordinances of the church” [E 3v].⁴ Both these examples of reading might be understood as springing from a wish to participate in the period's re-examination of spiritual life. In the criticism of both authors, Erasmus and Ryckes, cultural matters – “observances” – loom as large as theological or religious ones; or, perhaps more accurately, cultural matters like images or processions are seen to reflect a larger position in need of refreshment.

The cultural changes that accompanied religious shifts are visible throughout this book, but are nowhere more arresting than in the life and writing of Simon Appulby, London's last anchorite and the subject of the book's first chapter. Appulby was the author/translator of *Fruyte of Redempcyon*, a series of meditations on Christ's Passion that he first published in 1514 and 1517. The book carries an endorsement by Bishop of London Richard Fitzjames and hence recalls a parallel effort just a hundred years earlier when, in 1410, Nicholas Love received the formal approval of Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, for the transmission of his similar meditative work, *The Myrroure of the Blessed Life of Jesus Chryst*. Both Appulby's book and Love's book were successful attempts to bring scripturally based devotion to a wide audience. Arundel's sponsorship of Love's work is generally seen as an effort to mobilize the Church's traditional educative resources against the threat of Lollardy in the early fifteenth century, and at the opening of the sixteenth century Lollardy was again (or still) a matter of concern for the London episcopate. Drawing upon Bishop Fitzjames's register and notes from his lost court book, Susan Brigden cites the testimony of about forty City Lollards who were detected

³ John Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials Relating Chiefly to Religion, and the Reformation of It, and the Emergencies of the Church of England, under King Henry VIII, King Edward VI and Queen Mary I*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1822), 1, pt. 2, no. 89.

⁴ The text of *Ymage of Loue* is printed as Appendix A and discussed by E. Ruth Harvey in T. M. C. Lawler, G. Marc'hadour, and R. C. Marius (eds.), *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New York and London, 1981), VI, pt. 2.

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and who abjured between 1510 and 1518 – the years when *Fruyte* was first published.⁵

Appulby's book had a second flourishing as well: three editions appeared in 1530, 1531, and 1532, and since 1530 marks the accession of John Stokesley as Bishop of London another episcopal initiative seems likely, especially since Stokesley was a notable conservative. Erudite, scholastic (he deeply admired Duns Scotus), and severe in his pursuit of heretics, Stokesley explicitly opposed lay access to scripture in English. It thus seems likely that the five editions of Appulby's *Fruyte of Redempcyon* were part of a mustering of traditional resources in order to bring scripture in supervised form to an ever-widening audience, an audience that the technology of printing could increase still further. *Fruyte of Redempcyon* represented orthodoxy's best efforts in the years just before the Reformation, the kind of initiative that had achieved remarkable success in the past.

But Appulby died in 1537, in the midst of the five-year period when England's religious houses were being closed one by one. Though he was a priest, Appulby's affiliation was not with a religious house but with the poor London parish where he lived and served: All Hallows London Wall. Like the monasteries and friaries that passed into secular use, Appulby's living space, the anchorhold on the city wall, became a piece of secular patronage and about a year after his death was given to a member of the Mayor of London's staff.

Appulby's realization that both his vocation and its shelter might not endure is clear in his will, which leaves the books and vestments in his anchorhold to his successor. The will adds, however, that if a successor is not appointed in a year and a day, the items shall be disposed by the anchorite's executor. Appulby's London neighborhood itself had been subject to massive alteration: the local priory that held the advowson of Appulby's anchorhold, Holy Trinity, was the first religious institution in the country to close, in 1532. This experience of change might be thought to identify Appulby as a backward-looking figure, as his historic vocation of anchoritism could no longer be sustained. His *Fruyte of Redempcyon*, offering a traditional mediated approach to scripture as productive of an affective relation to Christ, now seemed culturally out of favor as well. Yet an intense meditative focus on the Passion would be an element in the developing Ignatian spirituality of the next decade, the 1540s – an element that would continue to influence the spirituality of English men and women in the next century.

⁵ Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989), p. 87.

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Appulby's sympathies seem to have lain entirely with traditional beliefs and structures, but for others, loyalties were divided. The degree to which English religious were sympathetic to reform is so large a subject that scholars have found it difficult to do more than gesture toward individual cases. Certainly the letters these religious sent to Thomas Cromwell, effectively their overseer during the 1530s, contain several powerful conservative statements on the value of institutional religious life. John Shepey, Abbot of Faversham, Kent, explains that if an abbot's duties be considered to consist of property supervision, his age might disqualify him but "if the chief office and profession of an abbot be (as I have ever taken it)" to live chaste and solitary, to serve God quietly, to relieve the poor and have a vigilant eye to the good order and rule of a house, he is "as well able yet now to supply and continue these parts as ever I was."⁶ Shepey is defending his decision to continue in place, though advanced in years, but his statement serves as a broader apologia for the system of which he was a part. In a much humbler vein, Jane Messyndyne, Prioress of Legbourne, wrote Cromwell: "Ye shall hear no complaints against us neither in our living nor hospitality keeping."⁷

But such unequivocal expressions occur side by side with more compromised statements and we might wonder about the effect of these powerful changes on the final years of conventual life, given the possibility – indeed the documented reality – of conflict within individual houses. Such conflict is particularly visible at the moment of the successful administration of the Act of Supremacy in late 1534 and early 1535 to most of the country's religious communities.⁸ It was a notable achievement: with whatever reservations, individually or collectively, professed religious en masse had now formally agreed that the king was the head of the Church.⁹ At the London Greenwich Observant house, the friars were unwilling to entertain a collective decision. Urged by Cromwell's visitors to leave their answer on the supremacy to the senior members of the house, they refused. "The convent stiffly affirmed that where the matter concerned particularly [individually] every one of their souls, they would answer particularly [individually] every man for him self."¹⁰

⁶ Wright, *Suppression*, p. 104. ⁷ Wright, *Suppression*, pp. 116–17.

⁸ G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972), counts 168 institutions, "abbeys, priories, hospitals, cathedral chapters and colleges," that gave their assent. "The number does not exhaust that of all such bodies in the realm, but it is much more likely that some documents are lost than that anyone was left out."

⁹ Peter Marshall has a thoughtful discussion of conformity and equivocation around this moment in *Religious Identities in Henry VIII's England* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 217ff.

¹⁰ Wright, *Suppression*, p. 42.

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This happened in June 1534; on October 25 an imprisoned Franciscan, Frances Lybert, wrote to a friend asking for news of his fellow grey friars in London and the Greenwich Observants, marveling to hear that some had sworn to the supremacy. Lybert was wrong about the Observants, but his reflections on the dilemma that all English religious faced are at once judicious and generous. At the same time, in their inability to predict even a personal course of action, they have a baffled quality that many religious must have shared. “Notwithstanding, if they think that God is pleased with [their submission], their conscience discharged, the world edified, and any profit may come of it, we desire to have a more perfect knowledge and then we shall do as God shall inspire us – either suffer pain still or else go at liberty as they do.”¹¹

Such insistence on personal judgment meant that many houses suffered division. Richard Mounslow, the last Benedictine abbot of Winchcombe, Gloucestershire, had to cope with a member of his house who wrote a treatise against “the usurped power of the Bishop of Rome” that he sent Cromwell, and Mounslow’s own letters to Cromwell make it clear that he had other monks whose disobedience was the result of conflicting religious positions.¹² Peter Cunich has recently noted that even at Syon, perhaps England’s most conservative house, we can see

evidence of an almost total breakdown in regular discipline among the brothers from about 1534 ... That so many of the brothers could have rebelled against the authority of their ailing Confessor-General [that is, in order to oppose the royal supremacy] in such an observant and well-disciplined community [shows] just how divisive the succession and supremacy policies were for religious communities around the country.¹³

The book’s second chapter is set in a milieu that makes these tensions particularly visible. Historian A. G. Dickens called the friars “the most deeply divided section of the regular clergy” at the dissolution,¹⁴ and the well-known letter of Thomas Chapman, warden (head) of the London Greyfriars, in which he assured Cromwell that he and his house were eager to relinquish their habits, has made that assessment seem a perceptive one.

The religious position of the anonymous member of that house who wrote the *Greyfriars Chronicle* is less clear. The chronicle comprises a series

¹¹ *LP*, VII, no. 1307. ¹² *LP*, IX, nos. 314, 321, 322, 934.

¹³ Peter Cunich, “The Brothers of Syon, 1420–1695,” in E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds.), *Syon Abbey and Its Books, Reading, Writing, and Religion c. 1400–1700* (Woodbridge, 2010), p. 69.

¹⁴ A. G. Dickens, *Thomas Cromwell and the English Reformation* (New York, 1959), p. 136.

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of jottings recording events in the capital between 1539 and 1554. At the closure of their house, twenty-five men signed the surrender document; for about half of this number, some trace of their later life survives in the historical record. Most of the dozen continued to live in London and several secured clerical positions, even – somewhat surprisingly – as rectors of London parishes. Three of them might be considered candidates for authorship of the chronicle: John Richardson (†1560), John Baker (†1570), and Albert Coleman (†1572). Hence this chapter constitutes a study of what can be recovered from a particular community after its demise. The exploration can be only a tentative one, since half the house remains untraced; nonetheless it is to some extent a narrative of clerical continuity. Coleman's situation is particularly intriguing. After the dissolution, he was employed as a London parish clerk, although in 1548 he had been described as relatively unlearned. Yet his 1572 will leaves books (mostly unspecified), and his overseer and protector was Lord Chidiock Paulet, a recusant younger son of the Marquis of Winchester.

The manuscript containing the *Greyfriars Chronicle* was recognized early for its value and before the end of the century it began its passage through the hands of several notable collectors and historians: John Stow, Robert Cotton, William Camden, William Dugdale. More speculative is the possibility of earlier ownership by Dugdale's father John, himself an antiquary and historian, and the further possibility that former friar Albert Coleman transmitted the book to Dugdale *père*.

The *Chronicle's* account of the twenty years in London just after the closing of its author's house might be read either as carefully neutral or at some points genuinely disengaged from the incidents it records. The execution of the Carthusians, or of Thomas More and John Fisher, are not condemned, merely noted. Though he describes "speaking against the sacrament" as "shameful," about 1534, the year of the Act of Supremacy, the author says "this year was the bishop of Rome's power put down." Political treason, however, regularly draws condemnation. The chronicler – who has been called "London's last Franciscan" – combines traditional belief in the eucharist, contempt for the papacy, anxiety at the pace of cultural change, and a profound personal loyalty to a series of rapidly changing rulers: Henry, Edward, Mary. The religious and political complexity of this troubled period is its author's central subject.

In the manuscript, the chronicle is preceded by narratives of general Franciscan history and a valuable listing of the burials in London's huge Greyfriars church. The author's own contribution to these materials, his mid-century London narrative, together with his addition of a regnal

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roll-chronicle at the very end of the manuscript, allows us to see him as a very late practitioner of the long monastic tradition of chronicle history writing. Particularly revealing are the text's responses to the loss of familiar cultural patterns.

This topic resurfaces in the third chapter, which is based on the administrative relation between three female heads of houses and Thomas Cromwell. As in the *Greyfriars Chronicle*, one of the subjects is the evolution of new social structures after the disappearance of enduring institutional forms; here the subject is female community. Cromwell's far-flung network of clientage extended not only to court and country but to the religious institutions as well. Several male heads of houses maintained personal ties with him and this was true of female superiors also: Katherine Bulkeley, Abbess of Godstow, Oxfordshire, was a recipient of Cromwell's patronage in the mid-1530s, and her six surviving letters to her sponsor reveal a relationship that was at times cheerfully informal. Like two other female appointees about this time, Morpheta Kingsmill, Abbess of Wherwell, Hampshire, and Joan Fane, Franciscan prioress of Dartford, Kent, Bulkeley had a brother who was connected with Cromwell. These female appointments of the mid-1530s should probably be considered supplementary favors, the primary recipient being the male family member.

Like others in their families, Bulkeley, Kingsmill, and Fane might all be thought to hold reforming beliefs in varying degrees. These are clear in Bulkeley's often-reprinted letter, not unlike that of Chapman, the Greyfriars warden, assuring Cromwell of her house's freedom from superstitious practices. She subsequently retired to a life with her family in Cheshire and the statement of belief in her will is a reforming one. The positions of the other two are less thoroughly documented. Though one of Kingsmill's letters to Cromwell survives, it is her will that has made her a figure of interest. The will, which leaves bequests to seven of her nuns, has suggested the existence of a post-dissolution female living community. The ardently Protestant activities of Kingsmill's brother, however, together with the abbess's apparently neutral mention in her will of the husband of one of her former nuns, seems to rule out the possibility of a renewed collective religious life structured along earlier lines. Unlike the Hampshire abbey of St. Mary Winchester only twenty miles away, where the nuns lived near one another in the cathedral close and continued as late as 1551, a dozen years after the dissolution, to wear their habits in public, Wherwell's continued existence (if indeed that is how the will bequests to former nuns should be interpreted) did not constitute a

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witness to traditional religious belief, but may instead represent a successful economic accommodation.

Joan Fane is the only one of these nuns whose position is revealed through her reading. Her ownership of a printed copy of reformer Robert Crowley's 1550 edition of *Piers Plowman* has been recently discovered. Tellingly, Fane was not part of Dartford's attempts to continue religious life after the house's closure, as her nuns experimented with various forms of community, first in Kent and, after 1558, in the Low Countries. In particular, the prioress's absence from any of the small living groups recorded in rural Kent probably indicates some division in the house. Her connection with Crowley's work was probably made through Elizabeth Fane, wife of the prioress's brother Sir Ralph. Elizabeth was a patron of Crowley who had in 1550 published her poems (now lost) and in 1551 dedicated his own poem "Pleasure and Pain" to her. Lady Fane also supported various imprisoned and later martyred controversialists, including John Bradford, Thomas Rose, John Philpot, and Nicholas Ridley. Prison letters exchanged between several of these men and Lady Fane survive, and the young Anne Cooke, likewise a partisan of religious reform, dedicated to "Lady F" her first work, a translation of the Italian sermons of reformer Bernardino Ochino. Given these connections, it seems likely that Joan Fane got her copy of *Piers* from her sister-in-law or her sister's printer friend, and that both women understood the poem as expressing criticism of the institutional church, particularly in its wealth. The man to whom Fane left her book, William More, was certainly sympathetic to this perspective; an important local official and Member of Parliament for Surrey, he was identified in the first parliament of Mary's reign as a favorer of "true religion," that is, reform.

This relationship between the three religious superiors and the ecclesiastical institution that they served is clearest in the case of Katherine Bulkeley, though it is likely that Joan Fane too had reforming sympathies. The subject of the fourth chapter, Margaret Vernon, was probably also inclined to reform, if only because of what we can see of her long and close friendship with Thomas Cromwell. Intimate, chatty, thoroughly personal, her twenty-one letters provide rare evidence of a sustained connection between this female administrator and her famous sponsor, a connection that may have been based on shared religious perspectives and that included other members of Cromwell's circle.

The earliest mention of Vernon has been thought to come from two years of accounts that give her name as prioress of the nunnery of St. Mary de Pré, near St. Albans, Hertfordshire. The accounts run from Michaelmas

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1513 to Michaelmas 1515. David M. Smith in his magisterial catalog of heads of religious houses asked whether this could be the later superior of Little Marlow, Buckinghamshire, and of Malling, Kent, but indexed her as two different persons. The discovery, however, of a previously unnoticed record of a royal pardon extended to Margaret Vernon, prioress, and the convent of Sopwell, Hertfordshire, on November 20, 1509, makes it likely that the Sopwell and the Pré prioresses are the same woman, given the physical closeness of the two Hertfordshire houses, either near or in St. Albans, and the dependence of both upon the great Benedictine abbey in that city.

Margaret Vernon in fact had an administrative career unparalleled by any other English nun, as head of four houses: Sopwell, St. Mary de Pré, Little Marlow, and finally Malling. Her relationship with Cromwell began in the 1520s before the minister's remarkable rise, when he was still in Cardinal Wolsey's employ and was serving, it seems, as Vernon's financial advisor while she was head of Little Marlow. Her letters show that she was negotiating at this time to become prioress of the London house of St. Helen's Bishopsgate, that she had received an assurance on this matter from Wolsey, and that Cromwell was acting as her agent. Though this negotiation eventually proved unsuccessful, Cromwell entrusted his only son Gregory to her care at Little Marlow for Gregory's first schooling, and her three letters about this matter outline a position that might be described as that of family friend. Subsequently, in 1536 when Little Marlow was closed, she sent Cromwell a letter remarkable for its undisguised anxiety, a letter that implores him to let her know what will happen to her.

Three months later Vernon had become abbess of the Kentish house of Malling, an appointment for which Cromwell had been heavily pressured by four or five of his other friends and connections. The conclusion of her story as Malling was dissolved in 1538 is as remarkable as the rest: in a most unusual initiative she asked Cromwell for permission to sell one of the house's manors in order to provide payments for herself and her sisters. Except perhaps for the invocation of the Holy Spirit, which may suggest a reforming habit of language, her letters do not reveal her beliefs, but her several casual mentions of Cromwell's intimates, all of whom shared his interest in reform, suggest that she too knew these men and found their perspectives congenial. Her remarkable rise had several elements: the personal sympathy that encouraged Cromwell to entrust his only son to her and the openness to reform that facilitated his sponsorship of her made possible her long administrative career.