

The Threat of the Convent: Seduction and Imprisonment in the Eighteenth Century

Introduction

The significance of convent narratives

This thesis will examine the ways in which English Protestants of the eighteenth century understood and imagined the phenomenon of the convent. The vast majority of the English population in this period would never see or visit a convent, although they were popular attractions for those who had a chance to take the Grand Tour.¹ Catholic girls could go abroad to enter one of the exiled English convents on the continent; these institutions have been the subject of fairly extensive research. Yet for most English Protestants the convent was fundamentally a foreign concept, and the convent as imagined in the texts examined here were the products of a foreign and to some degree mysterious national and religious culture. The texts examined range in nature from private letters to novels. Two are in the form of pamphlets which purport to be historical case reports, but which contain fictionalised elements. Across all these genres, there is a striking consistency in the language used to describe the threat posed by convents. I will argue that the language of these texts demonstrates a widespread concern in eighteenth century England about the risks which convents could pose for English Protestant girls.

The narratives fall into two broad categories (with a natural degree of overlap between them), each of which emphasises a different aspect of the threat of the convent. The first is that of the conversion narrative, in which a young girl is 'seduced' into converting to Catholicism against the wishes of her Protestant family. These texts tend to play upon Protestant beliefs about the licentious nature of Catholic institutions and the abuses of clerical power; their concerns are explicitly religious and implicitly sexual. The second set of texts is far less concerned with religion, although anti-Catholicism remains an important subtext. Instead they focus on the convent as a place of

¹ C. D. Van Strien, "Recusant Houses in the Southern Netherlands as Seen by British Tourists, c. 1650–1720," *Recusant History* 20 (1991)

imprisonment, in which Protestant families, guardians, or suitors could shut women away and deprive them of their liberty. In these imprisonment narratives, the convent figures as a microcosm of the tyrannical French state.

The perception of convents is a particularly valuable subject of enquiry because convents exist at the intersection of a number of different areas of social and cultural tension. Attitudes towards convents draw upon and demonstrate attitudes towards gender, religion, politics and money. Convent narratives deal explicitly with young women's choices and with issues of consent. They address the problems which arise over the rights and responsibilities of guarding women, and the extent to which women's destinies could be controlled by their families, lovers, and husbands. They also demonstrate the complexities of Protestant anti-Catholicism in the eighteenth century. Most of the narratives are strikingly anti-Catholic; they represent Catholicism as a religion of deception and despotism, a threat against which all Protestants should guard their daughters. In many cases, convent narratives were written for the express purpose of warning Protestants about the dangers of Catholicism and the convent. Yet the very reason that such warnings were deemed necessary was that, as the case records show, Protestants in the eighteenth century were demonstrating a new willingness to deal with foreign Catholics – even to the extent of sending them their daughters to educate. Convent narratives, then, perfectly represent the ways in which the eighteenth century was a period of profound transition in Protestant attitudes towards Rome.

Eighteenth century anti-Catholicism has been surprisingly under-studied, and the principal investigation into English attitudes in this period – that of Colin Haydon – focuses on political rather than cultural aspects of anti-Catholic prejudice.² Valuable studies of the cultural manifestations of anti-Catholicism and its relationship with issues of gender have generally been confined to the period from the Reformation to the end of the seventeenth

² Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England, c.1714-80: A Political and Social Study* (Manchester, 1993)

century. Writing on the seventeenth century, Frances Dolan and Alexandra Walsham, amongst others, have demonstrated the depth and complexity of the relationship between anti-Catholicism and gender, analysing Protestant concerns about the licentious nature of Jesuit priests and the sexually transgressive behaviour of Catholic women.³ Dolan has also produced the most notable piece of scholarship on early modern English perceptions of the convent. In 'Why are Nuns Funny?', she uses the frequent pornographic depictions of nuns and their appearance as laughing stocks in plays and ballads to argue that, in seventeenth century England, nuns represented 'that part of Catholicism that is to be dismissed rather than feared.'⁴ While I have incorporated many of Dolan's persuasive points about the status of nuns as 'limit cases' for the figures of women and Catholics, her argument is not fully applicable to the sources available for the eighteenth century. These later texts, I will argue, present nuns not primarily as figures of fun or as fantastic grotesques, but as part of a real and specific threat to the virtue of English Protestant girls.

Sources

This thesis deals with the Protestant perception of the convent as evidenced in two distinct but roughly contemporary sets of sources. The first is a selection of case reports of historical incidents in which girls and women were either 'seduced' into convents by being converted, or imprisoned in convents by family members, guardians, or suitors. Most of these reports are contained in private correspondence between English diplomats in Paris. These letters are now contained within the records of the State Paper Office, held in the National Archives. In most cases, an initial letter will set out the details of the case in question, and subsequent correspondence may record the action that has been taken and the eventual

³ Frances Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, gender, and seventeenth-century print culture* (Ithaca, 1999); Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, conformity and confessional polemic in early modern England* (Woodbridge, 1999)

⁴ Frances Dolan, 'Why Are Nuns Funny?', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 70.4 (2007), p509

consequences. Two cases – those of Ann Ketelby and Frances Shaftoe – were recorded not in diplomatic letters but in the form of pamphlets which were printed and distributed in London.

The second set of sources is a selection of novels published in England between 1765 and 1800, the plots of which all featured the same phenomenon of Protestant girls who, either through seduction or imprisonment, found themselves trapped in convents. This group of texts was identified by A. N. Acosta, who labels them ‘convent novels’, a term which I have adopted: she lists them as *The History of Indiana Danby* (1765); Brooke, *The History of Emily Montague* (1769); *Anecdotes of a Convent* (1771); Phebe Gibbes (attr.), *The American Fugitive: Or, Friendship in a Nunnery* (1778); Anne Fuller (attr.), *The Convent, Or the History of Sophia Nelson* (1786); and Agnes Maria Bennett (attr.), *De Valcourt* (1800).⁵ As Acosta argues, these novels represent a distinctive and important subgenre, since they differ in several important respects from the contemporary Gothic novels with which they are usually associated. In Gothic novels of the period, convents are usually a threatening presence; but they form part of an exotic narrative landscape which is far removed from the realities of English life, and the girls who are threatened with the cloister are European Catholics. The convent novels, by contrast, focus on the threat posed to English Protestant girls. They were written partly as warnings against the practice of sending Protestant girls to be educated in convents, and their plots bear striking similarities to the real-life cases which are recorded in diplomatic correspondence.

⁵ A.N. Acosta, ‘Hotbeds of Popery: Convents in the English Literary Imagination’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 15.3 (2003), p. 620

Conversion narratives: the fear of seduction

Convent schools

Sending a child abroad to be educated in a Catholic institution was illegal. This prohibition had been in force since the reign of Elizabeth and was reinforced by subsequent monarchs; as Charles I's statute put it, it was forbidden to take any child out of the kingdom 'to the intent and purpose to enter into, or be resident or trained up in any Priory, Abbey, [or] Nunnery' where they might be 'instructed, perswaded or strengthened in the Popish religion'.⁶ Throughout the seventeenth century Catholics had faced severe penalties in order to have their children brought up in the faith on the continent, and although the laws were irregularly enforced, those penalties were still in place for most of the eighteenth century. Given the virulence of anti-Catholic sentiment frequently expressed in the political arenas of England, it seems mystifying that Protestant families would take up the habit of sending their daughters to be raised by practitioners of the very religion believed to pose such a threat to the English nation. Yet the practice did occur: Protestant parents proved themselves willing to go against the letter of the law in order to secure convent educations for their daughters. Indeed, by 1743 the custom was seen as quite unremarkable. A pamphlet printed in that year describes the behaviour of one Major Roach, who sent his daughters to be brought up in a French Convent: 'The Major, by placing his Daughters to Board at a Convent in Paris, there to be educated, did no more than what our English People do every Day, when they send their Daughters to the Convents at Graveline, Calais and

⁶ Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, p143

Boulogne in France: Their Intention is not to fix them there; for when their Education is compleated, they go out of the Nunneries, and they return to England.’⁷

In the first place, therefore, we should examine what the incentives were for English Protestant parents to overcome their anti-Catholic prejudices when it came to their children’s education. Convent schools could offer a thorough grounding in the academic and practical skills expected of middle- and upper-class Englishwomen. The English Benedictines, for example, who ran a school at Dunkirk, offered ‘Geography, history, plain and ornamental work... Drawing... Dancing... Music’, and, critically, ‘the English and French languages’.⁸ For English Protestants, the prospect of their daughters learning French was of critical importance in the decision to send them to convents. Characters in the convent novels repeatedly point out the French language as a benefit of convent education: ‘Mr *Macallen* had a notion, that it was a requisite accomplishment in every woman of any fashion, to speak *French* elegantly, which was a great inducement to his consenting to his children’s going to *France*.’⁹ Indiana Danby’s guardian, Mrs Beverley, is similarly advised that Indiana’s education ‘was not complete without a more perfect knowledge of the French language, and that there was no acquiring that in England.’¹⁰ Louisa Boothby, one of the heroines of *Anecdotes of a Convent*, has been away at a convent school since she was ten, her mother having been urged by the Countess of Plumstead that it was the best possible education for a girl: ‘She had said so much to [my mother] in praise of a *French* education, and the

⁷ Philip Journeaulx, *Proceedings in a cause lately depending before the Parliament of Paris, in the nature of a ravishment of ward: wherein Philip Journeaulx, Esq; guardian to Deodata and Elizabeth Roach was appellant; and Richard Quane and others were defendants; Containing the arguments of M. Gueau de Reverseaux, and of Mr. Journeaulx; Translated from the French originals sign'd by the said advocate and guardian* (London, 1743), p. 129

⁸ Denis Evinson, *Pope's Corner : an historical survey of the Roman Catholic institutions in the London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham*, (London, 1980), p. 19

⁹ Author of *Memoirs of Mrs Williams, Anecdotes of a Convent*, (three vols, London, 1771), ii, 231

¹⁰ A Lady, *The History of Miss Indiana Danby*, (two vols, London, 1765), i, 75

impossibility of learning the language in any of our *English* schools, that she at last prevailed with her to consent... [my mother] requesting her, however, to place me in a Convent, where the children of the best families in that kingdom were educated.'¹¹ The implication of this passage is that procuring a convent education for one's daughters could provide valuable cultural cachet – a benefit for which it was worth risking the dangers of Catholic influence.

Acosta suggests that spending time in a convent may have been something like a female equivalent of the Grand Tour, giving girls a chance to acquire some continental polish, complete their education, and travel a little before their marriage –while still remaining under the strictest possible chaperonage.¹² It may also have been the case that some families were more willing to countenance the risk of Catholic influences upon their daughters than upon their sons. Before Catholic Emancipation, for a male heir to convert would have been disastrous to the family fortunes; for a daughter to pick up Catholic tendencies was not necessarily a catastrophe on the same scale, so that acquiring the benefits of a continental education might more easily have been considered worth the risk. Some evidence for this possibility is provided by the apparent tradition within mixed marriages of educating the daughters as Catholic and the sons as Protestant. This practice is a plot point in *The History of Mademoiselle de St Phale* and *Anecdotes of a Convent*, and Grandison in *Sir Charles Grandison* proposes it as a plan to Clementina; though how widespread it was in reality is harder to determine.

Whatever the reason, English Protestants of the eighteenth century did repeatedly demonstrate their willingness to place their daughters in the hands of the very Catholics

¹¹ Author of *Memoirs of Mrs Williams*, *Anecdotes of a Convent*, i, 185-6

¹² Acosta, 'Hotbeds of Popery', p. 635

who were so much the object of public distrust and political fear in England. This is how several of the cases represented in the State Papers begin: a Protestant parent, hopeful of the benefits, willingly places his child or children in a convent abroad for their care and education. The practice was not uncontroversial, however. As Niobe warns in *The American Fugitive*: ‘with a knowledge of the French language a taste for French vices is imbibed, French propensities, and French prejudices.’ Chief amongst these vices, of course, was Catholicism. *The American Fugitive* is the story of Maria, a Protestant girl sent to board at a nunnery, who converts to Catholicism and regrets it. The fear at the heart of this plot – that young Protestant women would be induced by some means or other to accept Catholicism during their time abroad – was a pervasive one.

There is compelling evidence, moreover, that these fears were not entirely unfounded. For proof of the conversion of Protestant girls in convent schools, we need only look at the convent records. The chronicles and obituary books of the exiled English convents record multiple cases of women who professed as nuns after having converted as schoolgirls. Hannah Harper, for instance, a choir nun of the Brussels Benedictines, had been a Protestant, ‘but was sent for her education to the Benedictines at Calais, she there discovered her error and embraced the true faith.’¹³ Mary Horbury, who professed as a nun at the Mary Ward Institute in 1773, was received into the church while being educated in Paris; Anna Paterson, an Augustinian at Bruges had been educated in the Ursuline choir school at St Omer and converted by a priest at the age of eighteen.¹⁴ Margaret Clifford, a lay sister with the Conceptionists at Paris, abjured Protestantism at Hammersmith in 1713 at the age of seventeen, and was recommended to the convent by Bishop Gifford. Her case

¹³ ‘List of Converts’, *Who Were the Nuns?*, accessed 18 February 2013, at <http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/search/convlst.html>

¹⁴ ‘List of Converts’, *Who Were the Nuns?*, accessed 18 February 2013

bears a striking resemblance to that of Ann Ketelby, a Protestant girl whose case was described in a pamphlet of 1700; Ann had spent time in the Mary Ward Institute at Hammersmith, almost certainly the site of Margaret Clifford's abjuration, and was confirmed by Bishop Gifford there.¹⁵ Whether Gifford and the Mary Ward sisters made a practice of producing converts beyond these two cases is unclear, but by no means unlikely. Most conversion cases left no documentary trace except for a brief mention in convent records; no personal or family letters on the topic seem to have been preserved. In a few instances, however, Protestant parents fought back against the conversion or attempted conversion of their daughters, and the records of their attempts to win their daughters back survive in the archives of the correspondence of the British Embassy in Paris, to which they often appealed for help.

In March 1772, for example, Humphrey Roberts was convinced by Peter Tavernier, a Catholic, to send his daughter Elizabeth to be educated abroad, Tavernier having persuaded him of 'the great advantage my Daughter would receive from having her Education in France'.¹⁶ Elizabeth Roberts' experience, however, was one which exemplified the worst Protestant fears about what would happen to girls who were put into Catholic hands: 'my unfortunate Child is put into a Convent, & every Act exerted to persuade her to embrace the Roman Catholic religion...she is closely confined by the Superior, and not permitted the privelidge of visiting...any other person but those of the Roman Catholic Religion, who are continually terrifying her with Threats of Damnation, if she does not speedily make her Confession & receive the first Communion.'¹⁷ Miss Roberts' case was taken up by the British

¹⁵'List of Converts', *Who Were the Nuns?*, accessed 18 February 2013; *An Account of the seducing of Ann, the daughter of Edward Ketelbey, of Ludlow, Gent., to the popish religion* (London, 1700), p. 6

¹⁶ National Archives, SP 78/289, fo. 123: Humphrey Roberts to Rochford, 18 August, 1773.

¹⁷ NA, SP 78/289, fo. 123: Humphrey Roberts to Rochford, 18 August, 1773.

embassy in Paris, which arranged for her release. The diplomat who handled the case, Horace St Paul, commented in his report: 'This example ought to be a lesson to Parents, and prevent the ill-judged Custom of Protestants sending their Children to be educated in France; it would then answer a good purpose, and I sincerely hope it may in some degree, for I have long seen this practice with pain, and have wished it to be prevented.'¹⁸ This comment has two important implications. First, it suggests that St Paul believed that the Roberts case would attract some degree of attention in England; secondly, it represents the frustration which many English diplomats felt at a custom which had been causing similar problems for several decades. A similar complaint from five years earlier, this time written by the fourth earl of Rochford, demonstrates the persistence of the problem. Rochford describes the problems afflicting English expatriates in Bordeaux: 'Their Children when very young have been often wheedled into Convents, and retained there, notwithstanding their being reclaimed by their Parents, and Complaints made of it to the French Courts...'¹⁹

The cases which had led the diplomats to develop this sense of frustration have left their own records in the embassy correspondence. In 1728, a woman named Mrs Younger had placed her daughter, then nine, in a French convent; when she tried to retrieve her three years later, she found that the girl had embraced Catholicism and refused to leave. James Waldegrave's account of the case demonstrates the typical Protestant scepticism of such conversions. He records that he had urged the cardinal not to listen to the girl's claims to Catholicism, 'which were only what the nuns give in to the girls mouth'. Notably, however, he also demonstrates a degree of resignation to the proselytising tendencies of the nuns.

¹⁸ NA, SP 78/289, fo. 138: St. Paul to Rochford, 26 August, 1773. On St. Paul, see Horace St. Paul and George Grey Butler (ed.), *Colonel St. Paul of Ewart, soldier and diplomat* (London, 1911)

¹⁹ NA, SP 78/272, fo. 261, enclosed in fo. 256: Rochford to Shelburne, 7 May, 1767. On Rochford, see Geoffrey W. Rice, 'Nassau van Zuylestein, William Henry van, fourth earl of Rochford (1717–1781)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30312>, accessed 20 Feb 2013]

Speaking of Mrs Younger, he complains: 'I don't see what remedy she can expect, she is the cause of her own misfortune... her indiscretion in placing her girl in a nunnery where of Course she would be tampered with, leaving her there for above two years without any body to guard her Child against the subtil insinuations of the Nuns...'. Waldegrave repeatedly points out in his letter that Mrs Younger was committing a crime by sending her daughter abroad in the first place: 'I own for my part I don't Look upon his Majesty's or the nations honour to be any ways concerned in insisting for satisfaction which has an Illegal act of a subject for its foundation, for placing a child in a Popish convent, is by our law a Praemunire...'²⁰ Waldegrave's pragmatic attitude, as displayed in this letter, may have been in part a consequence of his own identity as a convert from Catholicism; he certainly seems to have lacked the hysterical tone taken by many of his contemporaries when discussing the threats posed by Popery.²¹ His casual assumption, however, that any girl placed in a convent would 'of Course' be subjected to 'interference' is a telling one. It reflects a widespread belief about the dangers of convent education. The language of letters such as Waldegrave demonstrates the interactive relationship between the diplomatic responses to individual cases and broader anti-Catholic trends in English Protestant thought. Reports of cases such as these reinforced Protestant beliefs about the risk of conversion for girls sent abroad, and the response to cases where this did actually occur was conditioned by the diplomats' assumption that it was a widely understood risk.

Historical cases of the conversion of schoolgirls throw a new light onto texts such as *The American Fugitive*. When Niobe, the voice of reason in the novel, says of the nuns: 'if I

²⁰ NA, SP 78/199, fo. 207: Waldegrave to Delafaye, 21 July, 1731

²¹ Philip Woodfine, 'Waldegrave, James, first Earl Waldegrave (1684–1741)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28437, accessed 18 Feb 2013]

should ever escape their gripe, ever return to my own country, I will *bare* their hypocrisy to noon-day inspection, and guard the public from future deception',²² it is clear that her words are a programmatic statement about the purpose of the novel itself. The plot of the novel should be read not as a gothic fantasy but as a practical warning to Protestant parents about dangers which were perceived as real and present. Such an interpretation is borne out by the commentary upon the novel which appeared in the *Critical Review*: the reviewer states that through the novel 'we are made acquainted with the vices and allurements of convents, with the dangers which virtue and religion run within their holy walls. This intelligence is not new to the world... but mothers and guardians may profit by what cannot easily be exaggerated, by what they cannot be told too often.'²³ The similarity of this sentiment to those expressed by Waldegrave and St Paul in their letters is no coincidence. Both the correspondence and the literary reviews are demonstrating the strength of the lingering Protestant conviction that the convent would always be a place of danger for impressionable girls.

Conversion as a Sexual Threat

The fear of conversion played upon specific Protestant prejudices about Catholics and Catholicism. In both the diplomatic reports and the novels, Catholics' attempts to convert young girls are described using language which explicitly evokes longstanding tropes of anti-Catholic discourse. Foremost among the traits attributed to Catholics in conversion narratives are licentiousness, hypocrisy, and deceptiveness. A brief examination of the language used in these texts will suffice to show the ways in which they draw on these

²² A Lady, *The American Fugitive: or, friendship in a nunnery* (Dublin, 1784), p. 48

²³ *The Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature*, 46 (1778), 300-1

tropes in order to characterise the convent as a focal point for the most dangerous aspects of Catholicism.

Throughout the texts, the attempts of Catholics to proselytise young girls is consistently described using the language of seduction. 'Seduced' is the word used to describe the conversion of Alex Ker's children in 1763.²⁴ The image of seduction is the refrain of the 1700 pamphlet *The Seducing of Ann Ketelby*, which describes a young girl who falls prey to Catholic influences when her father is away from home: 'a reputed Popish Priest... Seduced her to the Popish religion; but instructed her of what dangerous Consequence it might be if discovered, both the Seducer and Seduced being punishable with Death'.²⁵

Clearly, there was a well established association between religious and sexual interference; the language used to describe an assault on a Protestant girl's religious virtue is much the same as that which would be used to describe an attempt on her sexual virtue. It is important at this point to note the particular force of the word 'seduction' in eighteenth century England. This was a period in which narratives of sexual seduction were a literary staple. Faramerz Dabhoiwala, A. D. Harvey and Susan Staves have discussed the developing anxieties over the sexual vulnerability of girls and the fate of 'fallen women' in the context of what Dabhoiwala describes as 'a much larger, growing concern about seduction'.²⁶ The literary manifestations of these concerns have been widely studied: they include the works of Samuel Richardson, Amelia Opie, Hugh Kelly and Oliver Goldsmith. Seduction was a defining feature of the emerging eighteenth century novel, and as a concept it was critical to the perceived nature of relations between men and women: men pursued and women,

²⁴ NA, SP 78/268, fo. 84: Alex Ker to Richmond, 19 October, 1765

²⁵ *An Account of the seducing of Ann*, p. 1

²⁶ Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London, 2012); A.D. Harvey, *Sex in Georgian England: Attitudes and Prejudices from the 1720s to the 1820s* (London, 1994); Susan Staves, 'British Seduced Maidens', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 14.2 (1980-1)

eventually, were overcome. As Toni Bowers puts it: 'It became routine to encounter seduction/rape stories in any number of contexts, and to understand them as speaking to matters far beyond their ostensible purview, sexual relations.' Precisely this process was at work when writers used the language of seduction to describe Catholic conversion.

Indeed, the language of conversion narratives has even more in common with that of the contemporaneous seduction narratives than might at first be apparent. The language of eighteenth century seduction narratives has been analysed at length by Bowers, who defines them as 'narratives of sexual pursuit, resistance, and capitulation.'²⁷ In her study of the topic, Bowers outlines the way in which these seduction narratives were organised around the 'force or fraud' dichotomy. This phrase, she argues, recurs consistently in literature of the period as 'ubiquitous shorthand for the opposition between seduction... and rape'. This tension between seduction and rape was, she demonstrates, a dominant one in literature and political discourse of the period. Bowers briefly mentions that this fear of seduction could also apply in a religious context – 'English Protestants feared that their leaders (or spouses, or children, or friends) would be seduced by Roman Catholicism'²⁸ – but does not explore this avenue further. To see the applicability of Bowers' argument to religious discourse, we need only look at a sermon given by Richard Meadowcourt in 1740, warning against the threat of Popery: 'Let every Protestant be determined to support the *Reformation* to the utmost of his Power; to oppose the Progress of *Popery*; and to resist all Attempts either of Force or Fraud, which tend to introduce *Spiritual Oppression*'.²⁹ I would argue that the literature and reportage surrounding conversion in convent narratives

²⁷ Toni Bowers, *Force or Fraud: British Seduction Stories and the Problem of Resistance* (Oxford, 2011), p. xv

²⁸ Bowers, *Force or Fraud*, p. 17

²⁹ Richard Meadowcourt, *Popery disarmed of those weapons of force, and those instruments of fraud, in which it chiefly trusts. In a sermon preached at the Cathedral-church of Worcester, November the 5th, 1739* (London, 1740)

provides an excellent example of the very tropes which Bowers is describing. The process of conversion in these texts is always described using the language of ‘force or fraud’, and very often both occur sequentially: force is deployed once fraud has failed.

This pattern of a conversion which begins with a quasi-sexual, ‘fraudulent’ seduction is evident in several of the documentary sources, most strikingly in Alex Ker’s description of the abduction of his children in 1765. Mr Ker was living in Bordeaux when, according to the letter he sent to the Duke of Richmond, his ‘two youngest Children a Boy of ten and a Girl of eleven years old [were] decoy’d away from my Country house three miles distant & seduced by the Curate of Begle and his Vicar; who having debauched these poor Innocents with Caresses, false Promises & little Presents some time before, persuaded them att last to go to Bordeaux and to fall down before the ArchBishop, desiring to be instructed; upon which he caused shut up [sic] the girl in a Convent & the boy in the College of Guienne.’³⁰ The letter refers several times to the ‘Fraud’ of the curate, who forges letters purporting to be from the children. The elements of the seduction described here – physical caresses, flattery and gifts – recur consistently in descriptions of this kind of Catholic grooming behaviour. It is particularly prevalent in the novels. Alex Ker’s language is strikingly similar to that of Louise Boothby’s account of the nuns in *Anecdotes of a Convent*: ‘They are, to use a *French* expression, seducingly *caressante*... The flattering compliments they paid to my little person... the declarations they made of their admiration of figure... the numberless presents they made me of beads, housewives, pincushions, pictures of saints, and sugar plumbs... all

³⁰ NA, SP 78/268, fo. 84: Alex Ker to Richmond, 19 October, 1765

these things put together almost turn'd my head'; later, 'they...offered me chocolate, biscuits, sweetmeats of all sorts... kissing and caressing me alternately'.³¹

Anecdotes of a Convent repeatedly emphasises the unique persuasive power of these kisses and caresses. Louisa later refers to those nuns who have been 'not *forced*, for that's very uncommon, but *seduced*, into the taking of the veil; what I mean by seduced is, by the caresses... of the nuns'. This emphasis on the importance of touch demonstrates the explicit connection drawn between religious proselytising and sexual interference. It is important to realise that this link was already well-established in the English Protestant imagination well before the eighteenth century. Take, for a single example, a 1641 pamphlet which accused an English vicar of being a Papist, adducing as evidence his treatment of the parish's women: he 'used many flattering words and complements to [a woman], and taking her at advantage, in a private room, persuaded her to lie with him, which she refusing, he still persisted in this his wicked and lustfull desire...she ran out from him, and comming [sic] out of the room, he affirmed and swore to Mistris *Valentine*, *That this Puritan slut he could not convert her.*'³² The language used to describe the ways in which Catholic adults touched children and young women in conversion narratives precisely echoed contemporary descriptions of the behaviour of sexual libertines towards innocent girls. Take Samuel Johnson's 1751 lament over the state of fallen women: 'They were all once...innocent; and might still have continued blameless and easy, but for the arts and insinuations of those whose rank, fortune, or education, furnished them with the means to corrupt or delude them... those who perhaps first seduced them by caresses of fondness, or magnificence of

³¹ Author of *Memoirs of Mrs Williams, Anecdotes of a Convent*, i, 188-9, 193

³² *The Petition and articles of severall charge exhibited in Parliament against Edward Finch, vicar of Christs Church in London, and brother to Sir Iohn Finch, late Lord Keeper*, (London, 1641), p. 10

promises.³³ These lines would not be at all out of place as a description of a conversion attempt in a convent novel: they contain precisely the same anxieties about the predatory behaviour of the experienced towards the innocent, using the techniques of seductive touch and language.

English beliefs about the sexually licentious behaviour of Catholic priests, and particularly the scandalous nature of their relationship with nuns, have been well documented by Frances Dolan amongst others.³⁴ In the context of the convent novels, which express a very real fear of assaults on the religious and sexual virtue of Protestant girls, this licentiousness is no laughing matter. In *Anecdotes of a Convent*, the compliments which the nuns have been lavishing upon Louisa take on a distinctly lascivious air when delivered by the Father Confessor: ‘He...seating me next to him, began to pay me the most flattering compliments on my complexion, shape, airs, &c. &c. &c. I was almost disconcerted by the excess of his praises... and sure, added he, “None ever came out of [God’s] hands more perfect than you are, Miss *Boothby*;” he then proceeded to lament that so *fair* a body could contain a [Protestant] soul... he, taking one of my hands, continued thus...’³⁵

Accounts of conversion through fraud encompassed beliefs not only about the licentiousness of Catholics but also about their tendency towards hypocrisy and deception. In the convent novels, the nuns generally present an appealing face at first, as they attempt to portray their cloisters as places of genuine piety and as refuges from the world. Niobe in *The American Fugitive* compares them to the wicked sorcerers of fairy-tales: ‘The magicians that lie in wait for the innocent and unwary at the doors of the fatal castles, are they not the

³³ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, (1752), six vols, iv, no. 107, p. 61

³⁴ Frances Dolan, ‘Why Are Nuns Funny?’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 70.4 (2007)

³⁵ Author of *Memoirs of Mrs Williams*, *Anecdotes of a Convent*, i, 221

likenesses of these lady-abbesses, who, with smooth and dissembling speech, allure them into the gripe of their lords, and tickle only to wound?’³⁶ Here, Catholics’ words are presented as being as deceptive and threatening as their caresses. The notion that Catholic sophistry, ‘dissembling speech’, could lay a trap for the unwary – and particularly for girls, who were not well suited to theological arguments – was a persistent one. The safest course for a Protestant girl in a convent was to refrain from argument altogether, and thus avoid the danger described by Bower in her analysis of victim-blaming in seduction narratives: ‘There are numerous ways for a woman, despite her subordinate and responsive position, to accrue *all* the guilt. Was she over-confident of her own ability to detect and resist seduction?’³⁷ This is the trap into which Maria falls in *The American Fugitive*, since she fails to heed Niobe’s warning that ‘thought you may set out with ever fresh distinctions in your head, you would insensibly lose them.’³⁸ Sophia Nelson wisely avoids the same temptation in *The Convent*: ‘I am too sensible of my own weakness, to take upon me the task of defending [my religion]... pardon me therefore for, declining to enter the lists of argument’.³⁹

This contrast between Catholic sophistry and hypocrisy and Protestant frankness and truthfulness could be exploited by the authors of convent narratives in order to assert their own reliability. The introduction to the *Case and Narrative of Mrs. Frances Shaftoe*, a pamphlet which purported to be a true account of a convent imprisonment, has this to say to the reader: ‘The natural and artless manner, in which the many Facts and Matters contained in the following Narrative are related, must, in Proportion as it convinces all

³⁶ A Lady, *The American Fugitive*, pp. 87-8

³⁷ Bowers, *Force or Fraud*, p. 35

³⁸ A Lady, *The American Fugitive*, p. 31

³⁹ Anne Fuller, *The Convent: or, the history of Sophia Nelson* (two vols, London, 1786), ii, 133-4

readers of their Verity, affect them with a just Detestation of all the subtle malignant Intrigues of *Papists* in general, and a Horror at the barbarities exercised by their Priests and Devotees, on such unhappy Protestants as fall under their unjust power.’⁴⁰ The accusation of ‘subtle malignant intrigues’ carries a strong echo of Waldegrave’s ‘subtil insinuations’. In the Protestant imagination, linguistic subtlety was a sure sign of malicious intent.

The conviction that Catholic attempts to convert Protestants were founded upon deceit and hypocrisy is also evident in the language of the case reports. *The Seducing of Ann Ketelby* refers to ‘the Art of Popish Dissimulation’, which leads the converted Ann to deceive her family about her faith.⁴¹ In some cases Catholics were not even given credit for a religious motivation in their proselytising. When Susannah Tracy was imprisoned in a convent by her husband, the correspondence on the case notes that her husband had offered the abbess of the convent a thousand pounds if she could convert Susannah, ‘in Order to her being detained for Life’⁴²; it is as a consequence of this that Susannah is subjected to harassment on the topic of religion. This alleged hypocrisy represented an extreme case of a generally accepted principle: that the appearances presented by Catholics, especially in the danger zone of the convent, were on no account to be trusted.

As in Bowers’ seduction narratives, the general principle in conversion narratives was that if fraud failed, the Catholics would resort to force. This is a recurring theme in the novels. In *The Convent*, Mademoiselle D’Aulay describes her refusal to take the veil: ‘Flattery, threats, and much actual cruelty, have not been sufficient to conquer my resolution.’⁴³ In *The History of Mademoiselle De St. Phale*, the eponymous heroine, raised Catholic by her mother, tells

⁴⁰ Frances Shaftoe, *Popish intrigues and cruelty plainly exemplified*, (London, 1745) pp. iv-v

⁴¹ *An account of the seducing of Ann*, p. 2

⁴² NA, SP 78/233 f. 102: Petition for the release of Susanna Tracy, 1749

⁴³ Fuller, *The Convent*, ii, 135

her Protestant father of her intention to convert to his faith. In response he warns her: 'It may be...[that] your Relations will try by all imaginable Flattery and Kindness to turn you from your Resolution, and will not have recourse unto rigour, till they find all their promises and allurements uneffectual.'⁴⁴ A concrete example of this tactical progression is given in *Anecdotes of a Convent*. When Julia Bolton is being held captive by the nuns, she describes how 'All arts and entreaties were... made use of in order to engage me to eat, but to no purpose... They then forced my mouth open.'⁴⁵

As well as demonstrating the Catholic traits of fraud, licentiousness, and cruelty, conversion narratives also played upon one other Protestant fear: that Catholicism was subversive of natural hierarchies. Even Waldegrave, who took a more pragmatic attitude to conversion than most Protestant writers of the period, admitted this point. In his letter about Mrs Younger's daughter's refusal to leave the convent, he concedes: 'I am sensible it is an abominable thing in the French to refuse giving this girl up, but they follow their Laws and Religion, without considering that they encourage disobedience to Parents, which is contrary to all Laws Human or Divine.'⁴⁶ *The Seducing of Ann Ketelby* particularly emphasises the way in which Catholic influence had turned Ann against her parents: 'The Mother coming back into the Country, found her Daughter's Temper and Humour Changed, disowning her Mother's Power and Authority over her, and denying to do several Things she Commanded.'⁴⁷ A scene from *Anecdotes of a Convent* demonstrates the potency of this anxiety about Catholics subverting children away from their parents: 'I asked a little girl on the low pension, the other day, what she had learned by visiting France. She replied, with a

⁴⁴ *The history of Mademoiselle De St. Phale* (London, 1787), p. 96

⁴⁵ Author of *Memoirs of Mrs Williams, Anecdotes of a Convent*, ii, 132

⁴⁶ NA, SP 78/199, fo. 207: Waldegrave to Delafaye, 21 July, 1731

⁴⁷ *An account of the seducing of Ann*, p. 2

great *naivete*, to eat soup and tell her beads. “What, rejoined I, is your father a catholic, then?” – “No, Miss, both my father and mother go to Wapping-church every Sunday, and will make me go there too when I return home; but what of that? I shall never forget my *Ave Marias*, or my *Pater Nosters*, and can be of what religion I please, you know, in my heart.’⁴⁸

This trope is particularly interesting in light of the longstanding association of Catholicism with ‘disorderly women’ and the disruption of gender hierarchies. Frances Dolan has examined this connection in the seventeenth century Protestant imagination;⁴⁹ I would argue that convent narratives demonstrate the survival of the same association into the eighteenth century. Because they presented girls with an alternative to the family home, convents represented a potential threat to the patriarchal structure of the Protestant household.

The Threat of Imprisonment

Heiresses and disorderly women

Although, as discussed above, several of the convent novels directly address the theme of conversion or attempted conversion, and although evidence for this phenomenon is provided by the documentary sources, it was not only the fear of conversion which made the convent a threatening prospect to a Protestant audience. In fact, most of the cases dealt with by the Paris embassy do not involve conversion attempts. Rather, the majority of the cases involve another problem: the use of the convent by unscrupulous suitors, family members, or guardians as a convenient prison for Protestant girls and women. Like conversion, this theme of imprisonment is one which is dealt with at length in the novels. Indeed, Acosta suggests that in convent novels, as in the wider Gothic genre, abduction was

⁴⁸ A Lady, *The American Fugitive*, pp. 66-7

⁴⁹ Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, p. 8; see also Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Women on Top’, in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975)

'probably the most formulaic feature' of the plots. Specifically, the plots tend to consist of a young heiress who is forced into a convent by a relative, guardian, or spurned lover. The intention is to force her into making a particular marriage, either to her kidnapper or to their preferred candidate (the son of her guardian, for example.) The primary motivation in literary abduction narratives, then, is a mercenary one. Imprisonment by fortune-hunters is the fate which befalls the heroines of *The Convent*, *Anecdotes of a Convent* and *De Valcourt*. In some cases, as in that of Julia in *Anecdotes of a Convent*, the wicked relatives or suitors defend their actions by claiming that they are motivated not by money but by the immoral behaviour of the woman in question. As the case records attest, the use of convent imprisonment as a way of isolating women who were behaving in ways which threatened the family name was familiar to eighteenth century audiences.

Acosta goes on to express her belief that 'the practice of locking up Protestant women in Roman Catholic convents did indeed occur, although it would be difficult to determine how often and with what degree of coercion.' An examination of the cases outlined in the state papers allows us to attempt such a determination. In fact, the cases reported in the embassy correspondence reveal that each of the abduction scenarios identified by Acosta in a literary context had a basis in reality. In many cases there are striking similarities between the high-profile cases of heiresses who were imprisoned in French convents and their literary counterparts. Although several of the historical cases were well-publicised in England, it is not possible to prove any direct influences on the plots of individual novels. What is clear, however, is that both the case reports and the novels provide evidence of a broader cultural anxiety about the dangers which might befall young British girls on the Continent.

In reality as in the novels, the most frequent motivation for the imprisonment of young women in continental convents appears to have been financial. The most difficult and protracted of the convent imprisonment cases recorded in the state papers is that of the daughters of Major Roach, Deodata and Elizabeth. Major Roach had lived at Fort St George in Madras, and had sent the girls to a convent in France for their education. After his death, a woman named Mrs Raworth, who claimed to be their mother, arrived to claim them from the convent; however, the executors of Roach's will gave the guardianship of the girls to a man named Mr Quane. Quane proceeded to marry the elder daughter, who was either twelve or fourteen (this point was disputed between the parties) to his own son. The case is recorded in a 1741 summary sent by Antony Thompson to the duke of Newcastle, which explains the steps which the embassy has taken to support Mrs Raworth. The case was heard in front of the Parlement de Paris, and Mrs Raworth's representative also had her claim printed in England in the form of a long pamphlet.⁵⁰ Each of these sources accused Quane of mercenary motives. The diplomatic note records that, after having Deodata Roach's marriage to his son validated by the Parlement, Quane 'designed to set out the next week for London to demand her Portion. He has great occasion for it, to prevent a third Bankruptcy, there being Bills of Exchange of his protected at the French India Company to the Value of Eighteen Hundred Pound Sterling.'⁵¹ The pamphlet which was printed in England takes a similarly cynical view: 'The Fortunes that came to these Children, at their Father's Death, threw such a Lustre upon them, that they were look'd upon as Prizes of too great Importance not to be seiz'd.'⁵²

⁵⁰ NA, SP 78/227B, fo. 324: Thompson to Newcastle, 4 August, 1741; Journeaux, *Proceedings in a cause...*

⁵¹ NA, SP 78/227B, fo. 324 Thompson to Newcastle, 4 August, 1741

⁵² Journeaux, *Proceedings in a cause...*, p11

Roach's daughters were not the only heiresses to be fought over by those who wanted to secure them as brides. In 1749, Lady Mary Herbert appealed to Yorke to take her niece, Barbara Herbert, away from the convent at Port Royal where she had been placed by her guardians, Lord and Lady Montague. Mary Herbert claimed that the Montagus wanted to marry Barbara to their son and so gain control of her fortune. Mary Herbert's request to Yorke was that he should put Barbara into a convent near Paris for a month and that Mary and her other relatives should be allowed to see her, as the Montagus had supposedly prevented their doing so before. This is the situation as laid out in the diplomatic papers, and the embassy did indeed take Mary's side, delivering Barbara out of Lord and Lady Montagu's hands. Mary's motives, however, were far from pure. She had a marriage in mind for Barbara herself. A cousin of Barbara's father, who had inherited his title as earl of Powis, wanted to marry Barbara, and Mary had promised to arrange the match in return for an annuity. Indeed, she succeeded in marrying Barbara to the cousin, and when he failed to deliver the annuity he had promised in return she sued him for breach of promise and won.⁵³ Mary's financial situation in the 1740s was a dire one; she had long since lost her fortune through speculation, and she spent the decade trying unsuccessfully to raise enough capital to exploit her mining interests. On the other side, Barbara's mother Harriet, whose uncle and ally Lord Montagu was, had been cut off by her family for making an inappropriate second marriage and was spending most of her jointure on her new

⁵³ G. Martin Murphy, 'Herbert, Lady Mary (1686–1775)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38608>, accessed 18 Feb 2013]

husband's debts.⁵⁴ Each of the parties, then, had a serious financial incentive to attempt to win control of Barbara's lucrative marriage prospects.

The case of Barbara Herbert offers us a valuable insight into the exploitation of heiresses in the eighteenth century. Both sides of the dispute wanted Barbara in a convent, clearly understood to be the most convenient method of keeping her secure and secluded; it was a question of which convent, and under whose control. Lady Mary Herbert complained of the way in which Lady Montagu was able to control access to Barbara when she was at Port Royal. Lady Montagu supposedly 'kept Miss Herbert in the closest manner, not permitting her to speak to any one, but in her presence.' It seems certain that the equally determined Lady Mary would have used similar tactics once she had Barbara in her own chosen convent, for all that she promised Joseph Yorke, one of the diplomats handling the case, that she only wanted to let Barbara make up her own mind. Yorke writes that Mary's desire was 'to have Miss Herbert taken from Lady Montagu, and deposited in a Convent... where she herself may, without being influenced on by Lady Montagu... make a proper choice at this important crisis.'⁵⁵ Excluding Lady Montagu's influence would almost certainly have involved placing further restrictions on Barbara's ability to communicate with the outside world.

It was not only unmarried heiresses whose fates and fortunes could be contested by their male relatives and lovers. The case of Lady Wemyss, the wife of the fifth earl, bore many striking similarities to those of Mary Herbert and Deodata Roach, although she was a widow of around sixty years old when she was confined to a convent by her son and grandson.

⁵⁴ G. Martin Murphy, 'Herbert, Lady Mary (1686–1775)', accessed 18 Feb 2013; Victoria Halliwell, 'Beard, John (1716/17–1791)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2005 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1816>, accessed 18 Feb 2013]

⁵⁵ NA, SP 78/232, fo. 263: Yorke to Bedford, 10/21 June, 1749. On Yorke, see H. M. Scott, 'Yorke, Joseph, Baron Dover (1724–1792)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2009 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30243>, accessed 20 Feb 2013]

These two men, known as Lord Elcho and Captain Stewart, submitted as a justification that Lady Wemyss 'was at times out of her mind' and that her fortune was being exploited as a result by Alexander Murray, with whom she had been living improperly: 'Mr Murray took advantage of her situation, & appropriated her fortune which was 1200£ a year to her own use'. The natural counter-argument, put forward by Murray, was that 'the report of Lady Wemyss being disorder'd in her mind was only a scheme of Lord Elcho, in order to have his mother confin'd, & to be benefitted by part of her fortune.'⁵⁶ Murray's defence is lent some credibility by the facts of Elcho's dire financial situation. Elcho was a Jacobite whose lands had been forfeited under the 1746 act of attainder, and had lent money to Prince Charles Edward to fund the '45 campaign, which the Prince never repaid.⁵⁷ He had already convinced his mother to pass on to him her dowry of £500 a year, a gift which she later tried and failed to have revoked by the Scottish courts.⁵⁸

It was not possible, of course, for Elcho and Stewart to be open about their financial motivations. Rather they attempted to justify their actions using a defence of respectability. The excuse given by Lord Elcho for his mother's imprisonment was that 'the life she led with Mr Murray was so indecent & scandalous, that they were oblig'd in the name of her Family to suggest she might, as is customary here in such cases, be sent to a Convent, in order to prevent her continuing in a way of life so disagreeable to all her relations.'⁵⁹ The emphasis on Lady Wemyss' family and on the family name in this passage is of particular interest. It was true that Lady Wemyss had been separated from her husband, Lord Elcho's father, for

⁵⁶ NA, SP 78/270, fo. 250: Lennox to Richmond, 2 August, 1766

⁵⁷ Roger Turner, 'Wemyss, David, styled sixth earl of Wemyss (1721–1787)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2006 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29036, accessed 18 Feb 2013]

⁵⁸ Evan Charteris, 'Memoir', in David, Lord Elcho and Sir Evan Charteris, *A Short Account of the Affairs of Scotland*, p. 163

⁵⁹ NA, SP 78/270, fo. 250: Lennox to Richmond, 2 August, 1766

more than twenty years before his death; she was also the daughter of Colonel Francis Charteris, a notorious rake and convicted rapist who appears in the works of Swift and Pope 'as a byword for infamy.'⁶⁰ Quite possibly her son felt that, given her publically scandalous personal and family history, a defence on the grounds of respectability had a greater than usual chance of being accepted.

Although Elcho's defence was probably disingenuous, there were genuine cases in which convents were used as a method of isolating women whose behaviour was seen as disruptive or scandalous from the wider world. This was a form of convent imprisonment which could win widespread sympathy amongst Protestant audiences, since there was no all-female, respectable Protestant alternative available for ladies whose behaviour required restriction. In some cases, therefore, men who imprisoned women in convents for financial reasons claimed to be doing so out of the more palatable desire to protect the family name. In 1777 the third Viscount Weymouth received a memorandum regarding the case of Mrs Peixotto, whose husband was threatening to lock her up in a convent as punishment for what he believed had been her adulterous behaviour; Mr. Peixotto was convinced that his children were illegitimate, a belief with which no one seemed to concur.⁶¹ In this case there was no suggestion of a financial motive, although what Mr. Peixotto's true beliefs and intentions were remains unclear. Similarly, in 1775, St. Paul informed Rochford that he had obtained the release of Miss Plunkett, an Irish lady, who had been imprisoned in a French convent by her brother 'under pretence that she intends to make in improper marriage.'⁶² No more information is given about the case, and again, Mr Plunkett's motivations are

⁶⁰ Page Life, 'Charteris, Francis (c.1665–1732)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5175>, accessed 18 Feb 2013]

⁶¹ NA, SP 78/303, fo. 473: Prado to Weymouth, 28 August, 1777; NA, SP 78/303, fo. 469: Prado to Weymouth, 22 August, 1777

⁶² NA, SP 78/296, fo. 63: St. Paul to Rochford, 31 May, 1775

unclear; but the implication of the letter is that if his sister really *had* been intending to make an improper wedding, his prevention of the marriage by imprisoning his sister would have been a defensible act. A literary manifestation of the same phenomenon is to be found in *Anecdotes of a Convent*; when George Boothby, a fortune-hunter, imprisons Julia Bolton in a convent, he pretends that he is her husband and that she has been adulterous in order to prevent the locals or the nuns coming to her aid.

There was also the occasional case in which, as far as we can tell, no effort was made to defend or justify the exercise of a man's power over a dependent female. In 1749, the second earl of Albemarle was instructed to secure the release of Susanna Tracy, whose husband had imprisoned her in a French convent: 'the said Robert Tracy, failing in the many Efforts and Contrivances he made use of in Order to Debauch the said Susanna Tracy, about a year ago agreed to marry her, to which she willingly Consented upon the prospect of advancing her Fortune, But, soon after the Marriage was Consummated, He carried her to France under pretence of improving her Education, and, in a Clandestine manner Placed Her in a Convent, where she has ever since remained, and forced to Continue Intirely against her Inclination.' In this case there was no dispute over a fortune; as far as we can tell, the case was entirely a consequence of the most extreme form of marital incompatibility. Susanna was able to win her freedom because her friends had sufficient influence to bring her case to the attention of the authorities, but we must assume that less well-connected women in similar situations, who left no trace in the diplomatic records, were less successful in escaping their fates. The report of Susanna's imprisonment also leads us to question how deeply the literary language of convent and Gothic novels had penetrated the wider national consciousness. The description of Robert Tracy's barbarous behaviour is so

strikingly Gothic that it suggests a distinct literary influence: ‘upon her Friends complaining to Him of this barbarity His Answer was that, if they were not quiet, she should be removed to a Place where she should never be heard of more.’⁶³

The Politics of the Convent

One striking feature of the convent imprisonment cases, particularly when contrasted the conversion cases discussed earlier, is the notable lack of concern over religious issues. The anxieties demonstrated in this type of convent narrative are primarily not religious but political. In abduction and imprisonment narratives, the convent was a place of threat not simply because it was Catholic but because it represented a microcosm of what the Protestant imagination saw as the European Catholic tyrannical state. In the Herbert case, for example, all parties seemed to be equally willing to ignore the issue of confessional allegiance. The religious loyalties of the family were complicated: Mary, her father and her brother – Barbara’s father – were all Catholic. Barbara’s mother, however, was the daughter of first Earl Waldegrave, a convert to Protestantism. Moreover, the cousin to whom Mary was trying to marry Barbara was a staunch Protestant, an issue which, so far as we can tell, did not concern Mary at all. Mr Peixotto, who shut his wife up in a convent on the grounds of adultery, was Jewish; again, there was no mention of religion in the correspondence on the case.⁶⁴ The threat of the convent in these cases, then, was not explicitly a matter of religion. However, the notion of the convent as a prison drew heavily upon Protestant prejudices about the nature of European Catholic states and their ‘despotic’ forms of government – a prejudice which had religious as well as political elements.

⁶³ NA, SP 78/233, fo. 102: The Case of Susanna Tracy, enclosed in fo. 100: Bedford to Albemarle, 4 August, 1749

⁶⁴ NA, SP 78/303, fo. 469: Prado to Weymouth, 22 August 1777

Both the novels and the political correspondence reflect this Protestant conception of French Catholicism the alliance of a tyrannical religion and a despotic government. This was an old theme of English anti-Catholicism. A sermon of 1740, in one typical comment, referred to 'the State of those who live under Darkness of *Popery*, under the Terrors of an *Inquisition*, and under absolute *Bondage* of both Body and Mind.'⁶⁵ Convent imprisonment represented an imposition of these Catholic practices upon Protestant womanhood, and as such it was often framed in political terms as an assault on English liberties. This was a claim frequently made upon in the diplomatic letters. Alex Ker, speaking of the abduction of his children, declares that 'the Franchises & Indemnities of British Subjects confirm'd by so many Treatys were attacked in my person by this Fraud'⁶⁶. St Paul describes how a Miss Plunkett, imprisoned in a convent by her brother, has applied to him 'to obtain her liberty as a British Subject.' Similarly, Lord George Henry Lennox intervenes in the case of Lady Wemyss, imprisoned by her son and grandson, 'to demand the Liberty of a British subject, who, I understood, had been confin'd without even being accus'd of offending against the Laws of the Kingdom.'⁶⁷

The ultimate symbol of French Catholic despotism was the dreaded *lettre de cachet*, a letter carrying the royal seal which could authorise imprisonment without trial. As Sister Agatha tells Sophia in *The Convent*, 'There is something extremely dreadful in the sound of a Lettre de Cachet, which you who have lived under a free government, can scarcely conceive.' The

⁶⁵ Meadowcourt, *Popery Disarmed of those Weapons of Force...*, p. 23

⁶⁶ NA, SP 78/268, fo. 84: Ker to Richmond, 19 October, 1765

⁶⁷ NA, SP 78/270, fo. 250: Lennox to Richmond, 2 August, 1766. On Lennox see W. A. J. Archbold, 'Lennox, Lord George Henry (1737–1805)', rev. Timothy J. McCann, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2007 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16455>, accessed 20 Feb 2013]; on Richmond, William C. Lowe, 'Lennox, Charles, third duke of Richmond, third duke of Lennox, and duke of Aubigny in the French nobility (1735–1806)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16451>, accessed 20 Feb 2013]

diplomatic correspondence provides ample evidence of the use to which these writs could be put. In 1741, the Catholic guardian of Mrs Raworth's children used a *lettre de cachet* to prevent her from taking them away from a convent, and proceeded to marry her daughter to his son in order to obtain the girl's fortune.⁶⁸ In 1766 Lady Wemyss 'was taken up by a Lettre de Cachet... and carried away by force into a Convent'.

In the Protestant imagination, the convent represented the archetype of a Catholic state in miniature: subject to arbitrary power, governed by superstition and the whims of a corrupt priesthood, and without regard for the freedom of the individual. In many of the narratives found in the novels and case reports, Protestant individuals were accused of scandalous or immoral behaviour in conspiring to imprison girls and women. The distinction was always drawn, however, between the wicked behaviour of a single Protestant individual and the wickedness of the Catholic systems and institutions which allowed them to fulfil their schemes. The fact that convents existed in France and not in England was taken as evidence of some fundamental difference in the characters of the two nations and two religions. Thus, in *De Valcourt*, when Matilda is being abducted and carried off through France to a convent by her unscrupulous father, 'they journeyed through a country, where, from the religious prejudices of the people, and the tale he had already told [that he was taking his heretic daughter to a convent], he had less reason to fear a rescue, than while dragging her through her native country, where any tale of distress would have been more likely to interest.'⁶⁹

Of all the convent narratives of the eighteenth century, the most explicitly political was that of Frances Shaftoe, a case which presented something of an anomaly. In 1707, Shaftoe

⁶⁸ NA, SP 78/227B, fo. 324 Thompson to Newcastle, 4 August, 1741

⁶⁹ Agnes Maria Bennett, *De Valcourt*, (two vols, London, 1800), ii, 91

published a pamphlet in London containing account of events which had supposedly befallen her over the previous seven years. Unlike the usual heroines of convent narratives, Frances Shaftoe was not an heiress, nor had she been accused of adultery. According to her own tale, she had been tricked into a French convent and held prisoner there after she had discovered the Jacobite allegiances and treacherous activities of her employer, Sir Theophilus Oglethorpe, and his family. Shaftoe's text defies a straightforward categorisation: her description of the Oglethorpe family is accurate, and they were indeed involved in Jacobite subversion.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the pamphlet was clearly intended to provoke Protestant anger in England, and Shaftoe deliberately exploits specific anti-Catholic prejudices in her narrative – the fear of convent imprisonment prime amongst them. The specific allegation made against the Oglethorpes – that the Old Pretender was in fact the Oglethorpe's son, who had taken the place of the true Prince of Wales when the latter had died at five weeks old – was entirely without substance. The pamphlet was, however, a successful piece of propaganda. The first edition attracted considerable attention, as evidenced by a 1711 article in the *Observer* which argued for the truth of her claims.⁷¹ It was reprinted several times, and a second edition was produced in 1745, when confessional tensions in England, and fears over the Jacobite threat, were once again running high. The preface to the 1745 edition makes the political purpose of the text quite clear: 'The following narrative was first published for general Information, in the year 1707, when the subject of it was thought of such interesting and public Import, as to engage the Attention of the Government and Nation in general.' Although it is not a typical example of the genre, *Popish Intrigues* perfectly exemplifies the way in which convent imprisonment narratives

⁷⁰ John Childs, 'Oglethorpe, Sir Theophilus (1650–1702)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20618>, accessed 18 Feb 2013]

⁷¹ *Observer*, 27, (London, 1702)

represented Protestant fears over Catholic deception and despotism. When the French priests refuse to release her, Frances portrays herself as an emblem of English liberty under attack: 'I said I was *English* born, free from *French* laws, nor was there any *English* treated thus.'⁷²

The notion presented in the preface to the second edition of *Popish Intrigues* – that the publication of stories such as Fanny's could act as a warning to the English to be on their guard against the dangers of Catholicism – was a common theme in a number of the convent narratives. A crucial point in Shaftoe's narrative is her discovery that 'my Mother's Cries were all over *Newcastle*, That the Papists had stole away her Child, and carried her to *France*, and forced her child to be a Papist, and were forcing her to be a Nun; and in the Streets every Body was telling that the Papists had forced *Fanny Shaftoe* to be a Papist.' The belief that Protestant girls on the continent could be saved from danger if the people of England were sufficiently roused in their defence was clearly present in the novels and letters of the period. This was the motivation behind the publication of the proceedings in the case of Major Roach's daughters: the pamphlet presented a defence of the rights of Mrs Raworth which was intended to bolster public interest in the case.

An examination of the diplomatic correspondence makes it clear that the fate of girls who were being held in French convents could indeed be used as a pawn in wider political negotiations. In Antony Thompson's summary of the Roach case, for example, he records: 'The Avocat General said in his Conclusion, relating to His Most Christian Majesty's taking these Girls under his Protection, that the English could not well find fault with such a step,

⁷² Shaftoe, *Popish Intrigues*, p. 25

after having received so many of the French Subjects which had gone over to them.’⁷³ In the case of Alex Ker’s children, both Richmond and Lennox recorded their suspicion that the French were delaying handing them over because of ‘their ill founded Vexation of not being able to obtain D’Eon’ – this being a reference to the Chevalier D’Eon, a former French diplomat and spy who had leaked diplomatic secrets and was refusing to return to France.⁷⁴ Waldegrave, writing about the case of Mrs Younger’s daughter, complained about this stirring up of English sentiment in convent cases and the dangerous consequences it could have for diplomatic relations: ‘Perhaps [Mrs Younger] may complain in England... I can hardly allow this to be... a national concern, or a reason for increasing the animosity between the two Courts, and perhaps driving them to extremity.’⁷⁵ These words were written only a few months after the signing of the Treaty of Vienna, which marked the end of the alliance with France which had endured since 1716. Waldegrave clearly felt that incidents which were liable to stir up further anti-French sentiment at home were a dangerous factor in a diplomatic situation which was already highly delicate. His expression of that concern demonstrates the influence which convent imprisonment cases, which exemplified English fears of the mistreatment of Protestants in Europe, could have upon English public opinion.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The aim of this investigation has been to explore the image of the convent in the English Protestant imagination, and the ways in which that image manifested itself in the language of the time. This

⁷³ NA, SP 78/227B, fo. 324: Thompson to Newcastle, 4 August, 1741

⁷⁴ NA, SP 78/269, fo. 65: Richmond to Conway, 23 January 1766; NA, SP 78/269 fo. 115: Lennox to Conway, 29 January 1766

⁷⁵ NA, SP 78/199, fo. 207: Waldegrave to Delafaye, 21 July, 1731

⁷⁶ Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England*, p. 23

image was never rooted in reality; the absence of convents from England, their association with French tyranny, and the long cultural tradition of anti-Catholicism ensured that much. Yet, as these sources demonstrate, the fears of conversion and imprisonment which were displayed in the novels of the period cannot be dismissed simply as Gothic fantasies. It is beyond question that there was some relationship between the historical cases, often widely reported, of Protestant girls who ended up in convents and the deployment of such similar plots in contemporary fiction. Whether the relationship was a direct one remains unclear. There is no way of demonstrating that the authors of the novels had specific knowledge of individual cases. At the very least, however, both the historical cases and the novels were reactions to the same set of circumstances: a period of transition in attitudes towards Catholicism, the developing phenomenon of convent education for Protestant girls, and growing anxieties about the vulnerability of young women.

The fact that these texts represent Protestant fears and prejudices is precisely what makes them so valuable to a historian of changing attitudes in the eighteenth century. It is also a profound limitation, however, insofar as it conceals from us the voices of those most profoundly involved: the women themselves. Only occasionally do the sources reveal hints of the counter-narratives which converted or imprisoned women might have offered. In *The Seducing of Ann Ketelbey*, the author describes Ann's claims that she has fled her Protestant family to escape her father's 'cruel and severe usage', and that her sight has not been the same since her father beat her.⁷⁷ These alternative explanations for the appeal of Catholicism to young Protestant women are almost entirely absent from the convent narratives. The relationship of both the diplomatic correspondence and the fictional texts to objective reality was a complex one. Although all the texts relied on the context of the factual cases, those facts are mediated through the prejudices and preconceptions of Protestant authorship and readership. These texts, which ostensibly deal only with the

⁷⁷ *The Seducing of Ann*, p4

narrow topic of young women and foreign convents, therefore function as insistent condemnations of Catholicism at a time when the old certainties of English relations with Catholic Europe were increasingly being called into question.