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The Embodied Word

Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350–1700

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Introduction

From Corpse to Corpus

In 1716, the English Carmelite nuns of Antwerp, needing a larger crypt for burials, hired laborers, who took down “an entire side of the vault, in which eleven or twelve religious had been buried.” One of these was Margaret Wake (in religion Mother Mary Margaret of the Angels), who “had been buried thirty-eight years and two months” and for whom the community “had a great veneration.” The nuns thus ordered the workmen “not to disorder the bones, when they came to that grave, till some of the religious had viewed them.” In the presence of three or four nuns, Mary Margaret of the Angels’s coffin was opened, and “the Community was much surprised to find the body perfectly entire, fleshy, and formed.”

Thomas Hunter, the Jesuit author of the account of these events, provides a detailed description, declaring that the body “appears of a brownish complexion, but full of flesh, which like a liveing body yields to any impression made upon it, and rises again of it self when it is pressed: ye joints flexible, you find a little moisture when you touch ye flesh . . . and this very frequently breaths out an odoriferous balsamick
sent...[which] has sometimes filled ye whole roome."² The nuns called in various medical men and clerics, who arrived at the opinion that the body was indeed miraculously preserved and thus "the body of a saint."³

The prioress in 1716 was Mary Birbeck (in religion Mary Frances of St. Theresa), and the discovery inspired her to inaugurate a systematic program of writing the lives of the Antwerp nuns from the house’s foundation in 1619 onwards.⁴ In the account of Mary Frances of St. Theresa’s own life, we are told:

> It pleased his divine goodness to discover in her time [as Prioress] the hidden treasure of the incorrupt body of our Venerable Mother Mary Margarett of the Angels [Margaret Wake] in the year 1716, and allso the remainder of that of Sister Anne of St Bartholme the year 1718, as it is related in what is said of her. She also procured ye writing the lifes of Mother Mary Xaveria and Mother Mary Margarett, the first by Reverend Father Thomas Hunter, the 2d by the Reverend Father Percy Plowden... she took pains her self to transcribe all the memoires for this, as she allso did when they were finished by the aforesaid authours.⁵

That the prioress would react to the discovery of a nun’s miraculously preserved corpse by producing a corpus of writings consisting of nuns’ spiritual biographies befits the corporeally focused piety characteristic of the Antwerp Carmelites. In this monastic community, “spiritual and somatic experience” frequently “converged.”⁶ For instance, in a characteristic incident Catherine Burton (in religion the aforementioned Mother Mary Xaveria) recounts having “our Blessed Savior...really present in my breast in ye Blessed Sacrament.”⁷

Mary Xaveria’s Eucharistic experience not only unites the nun with Christ but also joins her with numerous medieval holy women who had such mystical experiences at communion, prompting us to consider the significance of past holy lives for these nuns. The production of a collection of life writings is a particularly apt response to the miraculous discovery of 1716, since the Antwerp Carmelites frequently turned to the vitae of earlier holy women to authorize their own lives. St. Teresa,
an important figure for the Antwerp Carmelites, formed a key link in a chain of relationships through which the past underwrote, and was animated in, the present. Not only was she the order’s founder, but she also herself “drew on the earlier example of Catherine of Siena.”

The roles of texts, and especially life writings, in shaping the Carmelite nuns’ lives transcended those of authorizing particular forms of spirituality by providing examples of recognized female holiness, or even of enabling imitation. Textual accounts of past holy lives played quite literally formative roles in the nuns’ own lives. Mary Birbeck’s “Life,” written as part of the ongoing program she began, elucidates a specifically textual dimension of the Carmelites’ understanding of identity. It indicates that in her youth she had “yet never a thought of becoming religious on the contrary seemed on occasions quite averss to it.” She was inspired to become a nun, however, by reading the life of St. Teresa of Avila:

She thought it allmost impossible for her to save her soul if engaged in the world and, being allways a great lover of reading and looking into all books she met with, was once in ye chamber of a priest, tumbling over his little liberary and he, perceiving it, chid her for disordering his books, but bid her chuse any one and he would lend it her most willingly. Upon which she was put to a stand, and viewing them all she fixed upon one that was placed very high which had a guilt back, without knowing what it was. The priest told her she had made an excellent choice, for it was the life of the great St Teresa, upon which they had some discourse of the wonderfull saint and Holy Order &c. She read it severall times over, and every time was more and more delighted with it, till at last she was so effectually confirmed in ye thoughts of ye dangers of the world and the security of a religious life, and so inspired with desire of being of her Holy Order that she immediately begged the same Father to procure her admittance here, which he did.

This scene in which reading the life of St. Teresa catalyzes Mary Birbeck’s vocation demonstrates that texts provide a vehicle through which others’ lives can be re-embodied, brought to life again in the reader’s life.
A saint’s earthly lived life made into a *vita* becomes for Mary Birbeck a *forma vitae*. That is, reading the life of St. Teresa causes a change in Mary Birbeck’s very selfhood and subsequently in the form of her life when she is professed, conforming her life to another text, that of the Carmelite monastic rule. Her reincarnation of St. Teresa’s *vita* is marked by the change in her name to Mary Frances of St. Theresa; her religious name marks the merging of her identity with that of the saint whose “Life” prompted her vocation. Mary Birbeck’s own “Life” in turn offers itself to others as, perhaps, a formative text for their own lives, a text that can be reincarnated by future readers.

The textually mediated connection between St. Teresa and Mary Birbeck illustrates that just as the corporeal and the spiritual are not readily separable in the Antwerp Carmel, so too boundaries between selves and others both past and present are permeable. The textually forged, open-bordered forms of subjectivity characteristic of the Antwerp Carmelites make putting forth the community’s history as a collection of individual nuns’ lives especially appropriate. The individual and the communal are both fully present in these women’s lived and textual lives, and the one is always informed by the other. The Carmelite nuns’ life writings reveal a “sense of a social self lodged within a network of others.” For these women religious, the self is both “reiterative” and “relational.” Appropriately, the “Lives” produced in the Antwerp Carmel blend first- and third-person accounts, as we see in the “Life of Mary Xaveria,” which combines Mary Xaveria’s autobiographical writings with Thomas Hunter’s presentation of her life.

The embodied and textual lives of the Antwerp Carmelites create meaning not only in their monastic community but also in larger cultural contexts from the local to the international. Father Hunter indicates that following the discovery, the physicians who examined the corpse and other eyewitnesses could not refrain from spreading the news, and the existence of the incorrupt body at the nunnery was “immediately published all over the town.” Crowds gathered at the Carmel, to the extent that, “[o]nce or twice, at the opening of the gate upon some necessary occasions,” the throngs “surprised the religious and rushed in in great numbers, in so much that they were several times obliged to call sol-
diers from the citadel to guard the inclosure.” The news traveled further still, and the “concours of people who came even from the neigbouring towns was so great, that the nuns could not for some days open their gate upon any account.” With access barred, those gathered sent in “such numbers of beads, medals, pictures, linens, &c., to be touched that it was sufficient employment for one or two religious for many days to comply with their request in touching the body and bringing them back.” This scene highlights the extraordinary spiritual power attributed to holy bodies, power that could be transmuted to and through other individual and communal bodies via the circulation of material objects.

The town folk of Antwerp and neighboring cities were not the only ones to take an interest in the discovery at the nunnery. High-ranking government officials too became involved: “The Governor, Prince d’Es­cula, led the guard twice himself, and being permitted to see the body, he cast himself at her feet, kissing them with tenderness and many tears, blessing Almighty God that he had lived to see such a precious treasure in his Government. The next day he sent the Princess, his spouse, who was also wonderfully moved with devotion and piety, and in token of her respect she took the ring off her own finger and desired the director of the monastery to put it on the finger of the holy body, where it yet remains.” The participation of the prince and princess draws our attention to the ever-present political potency of holy bodies. Their involvement attests to their faith in the spiritual benefits available from the miraculously preserved corpse and to their devotion to the religious foundation. Their public acts of veneration also suggest, at least potentially, their sympathy with (perhaps even support for) the nuns’ ongoing program of opposition to the English Protestant state.

Both the English Carmelite house at Antwerp and the English Carmelite nunnery at Lierre were quite knowledgeable about, and intimately involved in, English politics in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Thanks to Queen Henrietta Maria’s Catholicism, the Royalist faction was considered to be sympathetic to that faith and to the return of monastic communities to Britain. Not surprisingly, “The Carmelites at various times gave shelter to ‘distressed cavaliers’ . . . , and the religious
appear to have been well aware of the intricate politics of the court in exile during the English Civil War." The Royalist and pro-Catholic causes were of interest not only to the nuns, who in the “Carmelite papers... represent themselves as true patriots, praying for the ‘poor distressed country of England,’” but also to the Catholic powers of the Habsburg Netherlands. Mary Margaret of the Angels’s miraculously preserved body might well have seemed to the nuns and their supporters to be a symbolic validation of their political position. The miracle was ripe for use in making the case for the divine approval of a re-Catholicized Britain, and the holy body’s symbolic value could be enhanced and multiplied through textual representation. Complex relationships of past and present again obtain. The past in a sense lived in the present in the incorrupt body of Mary Margaret of the Angels; her preserved corpse metonymically stood in for the preservation of the English Catholic cause. Her body thus at once represented the ongoing existence of the Catholic realm of the past and acted as a catalyst for action to re-form (and re-form) that body politic in the present.

The fact that Father Hunter reminds his audience of the precise date of Mary Margaret of the Angels’s death “thirty-eight years and two months ago”—that is, 1678—seems politically significant. The year 1678 was that of the so-called “Popish Plot,” and several of the Antwerp Carmelites, as well as their fellow English Carmelites at Lierre, had family members who fled England in the persecutions that ensued following the revelation of the plot. That Mary Margaret of the Angels died in that year but, as the discovery of her preserved body suggests, still endured in 1716 not only implies divine favor but symbolically suggests the endurance of the Catholic cause as well. Such a positive sign bestowed on the English Carmelite nunnery and on the Catholic cause was probably particularly welcome in light of the state of political affairs in 1716. The previous year had witnessed the failure of James Stuart (“James III” or “The Old Pretender”) to seize the throne through military force and to restore a Catholic monarchy, and many members of the exiled convents in the Low Countries had strong alliances with the Jacobites. The discovery of the miraculously preserved body could thus provide hope to the Catholic cause at a difficult juncture.
I begin with a fairly extended consideration of this series of events because they foreground precisely the tight, complex relationships among bodies and texts, pasts and presents, selves and others, that run through the writings and devotional practices of the women both Catholic and Protestant considered in this book. The miraculous discovery of 1716, and the textual production connected with it, provide us, quite literally, with a corpus of life writings of holy women founded upon a holy woman’s incorrupt corpse. Both the corpse and the textual corpus it engenders bear witness to the very bodily nature of the spirituality of the English Carmelite nuns. They highlight the centrality of gendered, holy bodies for and in the history of the monastic community as well as of the English body politic. The events of 1716 manifest a set of foundational concepts that cast long shadows simultaneously forward and backward through medieval and early modern religious cultures Catholic and Protestant, orthodox and heterodox. These concepts are incarnational piety, incarnational epistemology, incarnational textuality, and incarnational politics, and through the subsequent chapters they constitute the bones giving form to the corpus of this book.

By *incarnational piety*, I mean devotional practices and forms of spirituality focused on embodied interactions with holy bodies, especially those of Christ and the Virgin Mary—as when Mary Xaveria has “our Blessed Savior reaily present” in her breast when she receives the Eucharist. *Incarnational epistemology* refers to processes of knowledge production and acquisition grounded in corporeal, sensual, and affective experiences—as when the Antwerp nuns and clerics come to know Mary Margaret of the Angels’s sanctity through sight, touch, and smell. In *incarnational textuality*, porous boundaries obtain between embodied writers and readers and the textual corpus, as we see in the Carmelite life-writing project sparked by the discovery of the incorrupt body and in the way in which the *vita* of St. Teresa becomes a *forma vitae* for Mary Birbeck. Finally, I use the term *incarnational politics* to describe visions and revisions of bodies politic shaped or legitimated by holy bodies, and particularly by the sufferings of holy bodies.

I also begin with the 1716 events at the Antwerp Carmel precisely because they fall at the very end of the period under consideration in
this study; indeed, they fall just beyond the terminus date given in the book’s subtitle. Beginning just beyond the imagined end point of the study highlights that this book is, quite deliberately, not organized according to a strict chronological trajectory from medieval to early modern. Though the first chapter concentrates at length on medieval texts and the final chapter concentrates extensively on early modern writings, the book’s arguments do not assume a teleological progression from earlier to later, or from Catholic to Protestant. Indeed, quite the reverse is true, and one central aim of this book is to explore dialogic relationships between pasts and presents, to explore continuities and changes in concert.

Accounts of English religious culture have historically tended to organize themselves so that Catholicism and Protestantism, the medieval and the early modern, are mutually exclusive “others.” Each religion, each period, is often defined in large part by not being what the other is, or by being what the other is not; each embraces absolute, and opposed, categories of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Furthermore, in each period a particular type of relationship between the individual and God is purportedly central to orthodox religious practice—an institutionally mediated relationship in the case of medieval Roman Catholicism, a personal and independent one in the case of early modern Protestantism. There is certainly some truth in this well-established way of seeing the religious landscape. However, this paradigm has its roots in the polemic generated by early modern religious strife, and its continued survival is to a large extent grounded in equally polemical disciplinary and scholarly conflicts. At the heart of this project is a desire to reconsider the binaries of medieval and early modern, Catholic and Protestant, domestic and foreign, orthodox and heterodox, that have obscured important aspects of English religious cultures. The phrase “contested orthodoxies” in this book’s title thus refers as much to our contemporary academic orthodoxies concerning historical periodization and disciplinary organization as it does to confessional controversies in the medieval and early modern periods.

I also quite deliberately began my explorations of English religious cultures with events taking place beyond England’s shores to compli-
cate the national borders that so often, and so problematically, separate studies of “English” and “Continental” women’s textual and devotional cultures. “Englishness” itself is a category whose nature and definition this project revisits. Thus, throughout this book, in examining English religious cultures, I spend a great deal of time with women who were not English by birth or who, though of English origin, spent much of their lives across the English Channel, as did the members of the Antwerp Carmel.

I open, furthermore, with this very late early modern case because the modes of piety and subjectivity operating among the Antwerp Carmelite nuns call into question a particularly troublesome, though long established, way of demarcating the categories of the medieval and the early modern. The lives and “Lives” of these eighteenth-century nuns are explicitly as well as implicitly sutured to medieval holy women’s lives. The Carmelites exhibit forms of selfhood and modes of knowledge acquisition dependent on complexly continuous relations of past and present, interior and exterior, self and others. These early modern nuns force one to reconsider interpretive paradigms in which the early modern period is defined by a conceptualization of history that sharply divides past from present and by an awareness of subjectivity predicated on separations of interior from exterior, of self from others. In contrast, the medieval period, understood in such interpretive paradigms as the “other” against which the early modern is identified, is marked by a notion of temporality that precludes historical awareness and a notion of subjectivity that excludes interiority. For example, to set up medieval forms of identity as a foil to the emergent Renaissance subject, Jonathan Dollimore argues, quoting Walter Ullmann, that in the Middle Ages “what mattered was . . . not the individual but society, the corpus of all individuals.”

As the case of the Antwerp Carmelites begins to show, and as I will explore at length in subsequent chapters, there is a sense in which scholars who espouse such views speak part of the truth, but, crucially, only part. As we shall see in the writings of such figures as Julian of Norwich, St. Birgitta of Sweden, Margery Kempe, and St. Catherine of Siena, in medieval female spirituality the “corpus of all individuals” does matter
intensely, though not to the exclusion of individuality and certainly not in a way that allows us to presume that "the struggle for self-knowledge might legitimately be said to have its roots in protestantism and Renaissance humanism." On the contrary, texts associated with all of these medieval women are fundamentally predicated on individual experience and the struggle for self-knowledge. As Rachel Fulton and Bruce Holsinger argue in their introduction to History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person, “[W]hile certain types of individualism, subjectivity, self-consciousness, and so on are undeniably perceptible in medieval culture, just as crucial to our understanding of these types must be the processes, institutions, associations, and roles that enable their emergence.”

Additionally, in some respects clear chronological separations between past and present do indeed break down in medieval forms of devotion. This breakdown, though, neither precludes nor excludes an awareness of history and historicity. Brigitine texts, St. Catherine’s writings, The Book of Margery Kempe, and Julian’s Showings combine a transcendence of history with a profound awareness of their own historical moments as well as of their, and their society’s, own developments through historical time.

As the lives and “Lives” of the Carmelite nuns with whom this introduction opens have already shown, furthermore, the “corpus of all individuals” continues to matter intensely in the early modern period. One might readily repurpose Fulton and Holsinger’s argument cited above by simply replacing “medieval culture” with “early modern culture.” The English Benedictine nuns of Cambrai, Paris, Ghent, and Dunkirk considered in subsequent chapters will provide further evidence of this persistence of the communal. Aemilia Lanyer’s poetry, Grace Mildmay’s meditations, and Anna Trapnel’s prophecies and life writings, analyzed in chapters 1, 2, and 4 respectively, also reveal that the ongoing importance of the “corpus of all individuals” does not obtain only for early modern Catholic women who might be perceived as doggedly holding on to tattered remnants of a so-called “Age of Faith!”

Similarly, as the life writings of the Antwerp Carmelites have already demonstrated, something like the “undifferentiated temporality”
so frequently assigned to medieval religious culture continues to exist in, and to inform relations of past and present in, the early modern period. Past and present are not always fully or readily separable in the early modern period, any more than are self and others, or body and spirit. To put it simply, in both medieval and early modern women’s religious writings from diverse confessional origins, individuals and communities, bodies both personal and corporate as well as both past and present, matter together. In the writings of the medieval and early modern women that I analyze, there is clear evidence of interiority and individuality; in both periods, however, these exist in dynamic, mutually constitutive interactions with corporeal bodies and corporate communities.

In the first chapter, entitled “The Incarnational and the International: St. Birgitta of Sweden, St. Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, and Aemilia Lanyer,” I explicate the modes of incarnationality running through this study to show how they enable us to build bridges between pasts and presents, selves and others. I turn initially in this chapter to the early part of the period under consideration in this book, the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. I analyze the articulations of the incarnational paradigms that shape the events of 1716 in the lives and writings of three very important figures in later medieval English religious culture: St. Birgitta of Sweden, St. Catherine of Siena, and Julian of Norwich. These medieval holy women have, as later chapters demonstrate, important early modern afterlives. Additionally, as their appellations indicate, two of these three figures are not of English origin, one being a Swedish noblewoman and the other the daughter of an Italian dyer. Their significant roles in English religious cultures throughout the period of study further illuminate the profoundly international aspects of these cultures, even, perhaps especially, at moments when England struggled to craft a political identity separating itself from such Continental power centers as France, Spain, and Rome.

Because in the eighteenth century the English Carmelites of Antwerp still turned to texts, figures, and devotional practices drawn from medieval female spirituality in crafting their monastic identity, the resonances between their engagements with incarnational paradigms and those found in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century holy women do not
jar our expectations. In the final part of the first chapter, however, I turn to the early modern poet Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judeorum* to explore medieval incarnational legacies in a Protestant context where our expectations have not been conditioned to lead us to look for them. Lanyer, who lived in the temporal interval separating the medieval holy women discussed in the first sections of chapter 1 from the Carmelite nuns with whom the introduction begins, further exemplifies the internationality and confessional complexity of the English cultures under consideration. Her father, Baptist Bassano, an Italian immigrant to England, is described in his will as a “native of Venice,” and his family may have converted to Christianity from Judaism. Her mother, Margaret Johnson, an Englishwoman who was Baptist’s common-law wife, had connections with families (especially the Vaughan family) that had ties to the strongly reformist branch of the English Church.

Though Lanyer’s *Salve Deus* is generically different from the life writings, accounts of mystical experience, and letters produced by the medieval women writers considered in the first chapter, it in fact shares much with those works in its subject matter, philosophical underpinnings, and textual operations. The important place of incarnationality in various forms in Lanyer’s poetry initiates a series of explorations of continuities across confessional and temporal boundaries. These continuities have revisionary power not only for their own sociohistorical moments in which they reshape social relations among selves and others but also for our contemporary moment as they prompt us to rethink analytical categories and scholarly practices that are the ideological scripts for our own critical and professional cultures.

In the second chapter, I trace the early modern legacies of Julian of Norwich as I continue to revise some established views of English religious cultures Catholic and Protestant, medieval and early modern. Entitled “Medieval Legacies and Female Spiritualities across the ‘Great Divide’: Julian of Norwich, Grace Mildmay, and the English Benedictine Nuns of Cambrai and Paris,” chapter 2 consists of a comparative exploration of the texts and devotional practices of Julian of Norwich, seventeenth-century English Benedictine nuns living in Cambrai and Paris, and a Protestant gentry woman named Grace Mildmay (b. 1552,
d. 1620). At its heart lies a desire to grasp what remains constant, as well as what changes, in the ways in which these women experience and theorize relationships between humans and God. At the same time, my aim is to shed light on the ways in which individual experiences of the divine, especially gendered, bodily experiences expressed textually, signify for others both personally and sociohistorically.

I turn first to the English Benedictine nunneries established in Cambrai and Paris after the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Women religious in these communities read and copied Julian's *Showings*; indeed, these communities played a vital role in the survival of Julian’s texts. Margaret Gascoigne’s writings provide representative examples of Julian’s importance in this branch of English religious culture. In her and her religious sisters’ engagements with Julian’s texts, and in their own devotional and textual practices that were so strongly influenced by medieval female spirituality, affect and politics interpenetrate. Suffering human bodies, the textual corpus, and the corporate bodies of monastic communities intersect.

That early modern English Catholic women exiled from a Protestant England and devoted to the preservation of the “old religion” should form attachments to a woman whose writings and modes of spirituality embody “the medieval” is not terribly surprising, although the sustained importance of medieval female spirituality in the post-Reformation period is a little-studied cultural phenomenon. More surprising are the strong affinities between Julian’s *Showings* and the nearly one thousand manuscript pages of meditations and spiritual autobiography written by Grace Mildmay. In the second part of chapter 2 I turn to a comparative exploration of Julian of Norwich’s and Grace Mildmay’s texts read alongside those of Margaret Gascoigne to examine the significances of medieval affective and contemplative piety for a woman belonging to a religious tradition that is so often understood as defining itself in opposition to such forms of devotion. Here too important continuities exist in the ways in which bodies, especially suffering bodies, and words shape each other, and shape communities, across a confessional as well as a temporal divide. Here too a political component to textual and corporeal negotiations of past and present exists, since Grace Mildmay’s engagement
with the spirituality of the past informs her visions of the constitution of
the body that is the church and her attitudes toward the body that is the
English nation.

The English Benedictine communities of Cambrai and Paris demonstra-
tionstrate that shaping an English body politic could take place beyond
the confines of English shores. In chapter 3, entitled “Embodying the
‘Old Religion’ and Transforming the Body Politic: The Brigittines of
Syon, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, and Exiled Women Religious dur-
during the English Civil War,” I build a clearer case than has yet been made
for the profound importance of Spain as a nation and of women as spiri-
tual subjects in forging distinctive forms of early modern Englishness
strongly aligned with medieval religious culture. Like the Benedictine
nuns of Cambrai and Paris and the Carmelites of Antwerp, members of
the English Brigittine community of Syon, who following the Dissolu-
tion fled first to the Low Countries, then to Rouen, and finally to Spanish-
controlled Lisbon, participated in simultaneous enterprises of spiri-
tual conservation and oppositional nationalism. These nuns too formed
bonds with a figure from the medieval past who had overlapping spiri-
tual and political significance. For the Brigittine nuns in exile, the figure
and writings of St. Birgitta of Sweden filled a role similar to that played
by Julian of Norwich for the English Benedictines, or St. Teresa for the
English Carmelites of Antwerp. The early modern Brigittines interpreted
their experience of exile through the lens of the saint’s *imitatio Christi*
and the persecution she underwent in her career as a prophetic channel
for God’s Word.

The Brigittines of Syon and their English Catholic supporters in
exile likewise formed connections with a Spanish woman engaged in
her own embodiment of the “old religion,” Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza.
Luisa played a vital, though largely overlooked, role in promulgating
an oppositional model of English Catholic identity in the seventeenth
century. She had a strong commitment to the Jesuit English Mission
and, through her Jesuit connections, was closely connected to the “Syon
circle” on the Continent. She traveled to England to aid English Catholics
in 1605, the fraught year of the Gunpowder Plot that stirred up so much
anti-Catholic sentiment in England. While in England, she founded a
quasi-monastic order called the Society of the Sovereign Virgin Mary, Our Lady, the foundational texts for which demonstrate, I argue, significant Brigittine resonances.

The cases of the Syon nuns and of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza suggest that women not only aided in preserving English Catholicism in domestic settings, as many scholars have argued, but also took on more public and explicitly political roles—even, paradoxically, when they did confine themselves within domestic or monastic enclosures. In the final section of chapter 3, I look ahead to the years of the English Civil War and Protectorate, the historical environment for one of the central figures of chapter 4, to consider the ongoing, intersecting participation of Spain and English female monastic communities in oppositional English Catholic affairs. The chapter thus closes with a consideration of the roles played by the textual and devotional activities of the English Benedictine nuns of Ghent and Dunkirk in Royalist politics in the middle of the seventeenth century.

An overarching theme found in the writings of the eighteenth-century Carmelites of Antwerp, the fourteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich, the Tudor gentry woman Grace Mildmay, and the early modern nuns of Syon is that the autobiographical is both theological and political. In understanding the theological and political significance of the autobiographical, the body is, furthermore, central. Accordingly, the fourth chapter, entitled “Women’s Life Writing, Women’s Bodies, and the Gendered Politics of Faith: Margery Kempe, Anna Trapnel, and Elizabeth Cary,” undertakes a dialogic, comparative analysis of these three women’s (auto)biographical writings. The fundamental place of the body in these women’s piety, texts, and sociopolitical activities calls into view further continuities across temporal and confessional boundaries.

At first glance, Margery Kempe, Anna Trapnel, and Elizabeth Cary seem a disparate group indeed. Respectively, they are a fifteenth-century mystic, a seventeenth-century Baptist and Fifth Monarchist, and a seventeenth-century Catholic convert and author who became the subject of a biography written by one of her daughters, who was a nun in the English Benedictine community at Cambrai. Yet in spite of their different faiths and the divergent political situations in which they practiced their
faiths, these women, separated by more than two hundred years and by the upheaval of the Reformation, conceived of their relationships with Christ in similarly personal yet political terms. Their relationships to the divine as gendered, embodied subjects are central to their spiritual lives as well as to their social lives within their communities. In crafting and representing their lives, they all use a multivalenced “body language.” By this term I mean their bodily gestures and practices that signify so powerfully in their times and in their texts; I also refer to their language both written and oral that is so inseparably, and at time troublingly, linked to their female bodies. My readings of The Book of Margery Kempe, Anna Trapnel’s The Cry of a Stone and Anna Trapnel’s Report and Plea, and The Life of Lady Falkland highlight how all of these women turn texts into life even as they turn life into texts. Strikingly, in the process these women, who themselves destabilize the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, enact nearly identical self-authorizing strategies in publicizing their experiences of the divine both performatively and textually.

The final chapter, entitled “The Embodied Presence of the Past: Medieval History, Female Spirituality, and Traumatic Textuality, 1570–1700,” addresses the politico-cultural uses of medieval history and medieval female spirituality in texts written by men in the service of competing orthodoxies. I treat works that present cases of exemplary feminine piety as well as texts that invoke feminine piety for purposes of stigmatization. In this chapter, figures from previous chapters return, and Spain once again makes its presence felt in English religious cultures. St. Catherine of Siena plays an important role, and St. Birgitta of Sweden functions as a sort of touchstone. I examine the nature and significance of St. Birgitta’s appearance in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts both Catholic and Protestant that circulated at key moments of political uncertainty, including the furor surrounding the 1570 papal bull Regnans in excelsis, the succession crisis of the closing years of Elizabeth I’s reign, the controversy in the 1620s surrounding the proposed “Spanish Marriage” of the Prince of Wales and the Infanta Maria, and the tumult occasioned by the deposition and execution of Charles I.

In relation to the bull Regnans in excelsis, I consider John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments, a text that I see in some ways as the most Catholic of Protestant polemical works. I concentrate particularly on the edition
published in 1570, an edition in which Foxe greatly enhances the role of the persecuting Catholic Church. In this version, particular medieval female saints (including St. Birgitta and St. Catherine of Siena), the genre of medieval hagiography, and Spain all feature importantly. In this case incarnational piety and politics serve to demonize the Catholic Church and the realm of Spain—in part by strongly connecting the two to each other—as foils for a Protestant England led by the Virgin Queen. The material is, however, slippery. It becomes all too easy to imagine the Virgin Queen to whom the edition is dedicated becoming, at the hands of Philip of Spain (or another Catholic prince inspired by the papal bull), a virgin martyr not unlike those of the medieval hagiography that the representations of Protestant martyrs do so much to evoke even as Foxe asserts his rejection of Catholic saints and their “Lives.”

For recusant Catholics, and particularly for members and supporters of the highly politically involved community of English Brigittines in exile on the Continent, St. Birgitta serves as a figure of true English religion in a false Protestant age. As such, she becomes a nexus around which spiritual and nationalistic agendas coalesce, as the Jesuit Robert Parsons’s A Conference About the Next Succession to the Crowne of England (1594) reveals. In Protestant texts, St. Birgitta’s role is even more complex. Though Foxe recuperates her for the Protestant cause in the 1570 Acts and Monuments, using the critiques of papal corruption in her revelations to support his antipapal stance, in many Protestant writings she serves as a negative exemplar of “popish superstition,” as in William Guild’s Anti-Christ pointed and painted out (1655). I argue that she is singled out so frequently for this role in part because of her gender, since pejoratively feminizing the Catholic past is a common strategy in Protestant polemic, and in part because she did become so strongly associated with England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As a female saint who married and had children, she also is invoked by such writers as Thomas Goad in The Friers Chronicle, or The Trve Legend of Priests and Monkes Lives (1623) to make a case for the merely feigned chastity of nuns and the tainted, feminized nature of the Catholic Church as the “Whore of Rome” or “Whore of Babylon.”

A particularly interesting appearance of St. Birgitta occurs in William Pomfret’s The Life of the Right Honourable and Religious Lady Christian...
Late Countess of Devonshire (1685). Christian Cavendish, significantly the dedicatee of Goad’s *Friars Chronicle*, is described as living a religious life that puts that of St. Birgitta to shame. But as the author negotiates the political complexities of Christian’s commitment to the Royalist cause in conjunction with her anti-Catholicism, the line separating Christian Cavendish from the medieval, Catholic spirituality embodied by St. Birgitta blurs. Indeed, in Pomfret’s *Life* Christian ends up looking a great deal like the very saint from whom he takes such pains to distinguish her. The *Life of Christian Cavendish* thus strikingly reveals the ways in which the figure of St. Birgitta, and other dimensions of the medieval, Catholic, English past, can take on lives of their own in early modern texts and politics.