

TONYA J. MOUTRAY

REFUGEE NUNS,
THE FRENCH
REVOLUTION, AND
BRITISH LITERATURE
AND CULTURE



Refugee Nuns, the French Revolution, and British Literature and Culture

In eighteenth-century literature, negative representations of Catholic nuns and convents were pervasive. Yet, during the politico-religious crises initiated by the French Revolution, a striking literary shift took place as British writers championed the cause of nuns, lauded their socially relevant work, and addressed the attraction of the convent for British women. Interactions with Catholic religious, including priests and nuns, Tonya J. Moutray argues, motivated writers, including Hester Thrale Piozzi, Helen Maria Williams, and Charlotte Smith, to reevaluate the historical and contemporary utility of religious refugees. Beyond an analysis of literary texts, Moutray's study also examines nuns' personal and collective narratives, as well as news coverage of their arrival to England, enabling a nuanced investigation of a range of issues, including nuns' displacement and imprisonment in France, their rhetorical and practical strategies to resist authorities, representations of refugee migration to and resettlement in England, relationships with benefactors and locals, and the legal status of "English" nuns and convents in England, including their work in recruitment and education. Moutray shows how writers and the media negotiated the multivalent figure of the nun during the 1790s, shaping British perceptions of nuns and convents during a time critical to their survival.

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Tonya J. Moutray

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**To my grandmothers—
Mavis Naomi Reeves (1926–2010)
Darlene Sylvia Reile (1926–2015)**

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Preface and Acknowledgements

My interest in nuns in Britain during the Revolutionary Wars, and the ways in which they were represented and received in literary and popular culture, evolved over many years. Significant shifts in my understanding of religious life took place after visiting the Carmelite convent in St Denis, France, the Community of St Mary in Greenwich, NY (the first Anglican religious order in the U.S. founded in 1865 in New York City), and the Convent of Our Lady of Consolation, also known as Stanbrook Abbey, in Wass, North Yorkshire. The latter two communities, and many others around the world, are putting sustainable practices into place and continuing the tradition of monasticism at a time when recruits are few and the future of women's religious life is uncertain.

The survival of religious communities has been at risk for centuries. The heart-rending story of the martyrdom of the Carmelites of Compiègne in 1794 is perhaps the most well-known story of the struggle for survival that nuns in revolutionary France faced, a story made famous by Francis Poulenc's 1956 operatic adaptation of Georges Bernanos's screenplay, *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1949), itself a libretto adaptation of Gertrud von Le Fort's *Song at the Scaffold* (1933).

This book attempts to explicate some of the factors that threatened Catholic women's religious life in the 1790s. It also looks at the ways in which English nuns negotiated the traumatic and tenuous situations in which they found themselves, both on the Continent and after migrating to Britain. British Romantic writers introduced me to these women. The research of historians and the histories of religious communities have deepened my understanding of the interplay between literary representations and lived experience. This work would not be possible without the scholarly contributions of Margaret J. Mason, Dominic Aidan Belenger, Carmen M. Mangion, Caroline Bowden, Elizabeth Rapley, Claire Walker, Janet Hollinshead, and Susan O'Brien. The *Who Were the Nuns?* database through Queen Mary University of London and the Arts and Humanities Research Council has also been a major resource.

Many individuals have helped me in large and small ways, offering encouragement, substantive feedback, information on artwork, and editing assistance, as well as suggesting published and unpublished materials for consideration. Aparna Gollapudi, Jean Marsden, Carmen M. Mangion, Anna Battigelli, Pamela Cheek, Sister Scholastica Jacob, Anita Duneer, and the reviewer who read the manuscript

for Ashgate Press, worked with me on various chapters of the manuscript, providing historical corrections, adding clarity to the arguments, and helping me to further articulate the relationships between historical realities and literary representations. Jean Marsden has looked at much of my work over the years, including the initial proposal for this book and a draft of the Introduction. Many others also gave valuable feedback on portions of the manuscript, including Victoria Van Hying, Geoffrey Ross, David Baecker, Sister Mary Aline, Scott Winters, Jessica Zeccardi, Elijah Grey, Chris Vestuto, David Salomon, Jackie Redick, and Gladys Craig. Jayne Ritchie Boisvert provided the splendid translation of the ferocious speech of Madame de Lèvi de Mirepoix that begins Chapter 2. Chris Vestuto and Jackie Redick copy-edited various portions of the manuscript. My editor at Ashgate Press, Ann Donahue, was particularly helpful in guiding me through the process of publication.

This research would not have been possible without additional funding. Conference travel funds through the Dean's Office at Russell Sage College, as well as the Harder-McClellan Endowed Chair that I was awarded in 2013, enabled me to conduct research and present my work at conferences hosted by the History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland (H-WRBI), and the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS).

In 2011, and funded by a Schacht Fine Arts Grant through the Sage Colleges, I visited Stanbrook Abbey. Sister Scholastica Jacob was my host, sharing archival materials and articles, and deepening my understanding of the difficulties faced by the English Benedictines of Cambrai (as they were formerly known) both in France and Britain. Viewing the relics of the Carmelites of Compiègne, now housed there, took me out of the present and made the English Benedictines' story come alive. The Carmelites were lodged in the same prison as the Benedictine community. When their death orders came in 1794, the Carmelites dressed in their full habits, sparking the fascination with their story that continues to this day. The English Benedictines were given the simple peasant dress discarded by the Carmelites and humbly bedecked themselves in the garments for their journey to England. One set of these garments and a pair of shoes are housed in an exquisitely designed ark painted with scenes from the French Revolution.¹

Resources at multiple institutions have made this research possible, including the British Library, British Museum, Cambridge University Library, Guildhall Library, John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, Homer Babbidge Library at the University of Connecticut, Russell Sage College Library, and Vassar College Library. The staff at the Sage Colleges Library deserve a special thank-you, particularly Andrea Pike, who has located obscure items for me over the years and been infinitely patient with my requests to renew materials. I also want to thank the Trustees of the British Museum, Abbott Geoffrey Scott at Douai Abbey, Sister Mary Aline at the Convent of Nazareth in Bruges, and Abbess Andrea Savage at Stanbrook Abbey for granting permission to use the images in this book.

Finally, I am grateful for the support of friends, family, and colleagues, particularly Caroline Bowden, Carole Statham-Fletcher, Robin Moutray, Rebecca Moutray, Shealeen Meaney, David Baecker, Andor Skotnes, Sandra Schwab, Miranda

Simon, Nancy Cumo, Scott Winters, and Cheryl Derby. Though some have already been mentioned, I want to thank my colleagues at the Sage Colleges whose kind interest in and support of my research has been invaluable.

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Note

- 1 The ark, *Shrine for the Relics of the Carmelite Martyrs*, was hand-painted on wood by Dame Catherine Warner and the Sisters at the Community of Sainte Cécile, Solesmes, c. 1897. It is currently housed at Stanbrook Abbey, Wass, Yorkshire.

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Introduction

And Twilight to my lonely house a silent guest is come
In mask of gloom through every room she passes dusk & dumb
Her veil is spread, her shadow shed o'er stair and chamber void
And now I feel her presence steal even to my lone fireside.
Sit silent Nun—sit there and be
Comrade and Confidant to me.

Charlotte Brontë, "The Autumn Day its Course Has Run," 1843, Brussels

For what training is there compared to that of the Catholic nun? . . . There is nothing like the training which the Sacred Heart or the Order of St. Vincent gives to women.

Florence Nightingale to Henry Manning, 1853

A highly contested figure in Victorian society, the nun was at once fascinating and threatening, a relic from another world and an agent in the contemporary one. Brontë's verse and Nightingale's letter evoke just a few of the many contradictions that nuns embodied in nineteenth-century literature and culture.¹ Brontë personifies "Twilight" as a nun, a shadowed presence arriving "in mask of gloom." By the end of the poem, the speaker welcomes and invites the figure to inhabit the privileged position of "Comrade and Confidant." Yet, her very silence and status as a "guest" marginalizes and alienates her from closer intimacy. If the nun functioned as a literary trope for Brontë, however, nuns were very real individuals for Nightingale. She had experience working alongside and supervising Anglican and Catholic nuns at the Scutari military hospital during the Crimean War (1853–1856). She lamented the fact that secular women did not have similar opportunities for professional training and public work.² These contrasting characterizations of the nun, as both the mysterious outsider and the active professional, illuminate the divide between fictional and historical representations. They also point to the uncomfortable position of women religious who were breaking social norms in the Victorian era just as Catholic and Anglican women's orders in England were undergoing a period of significant growth.³ Nuns' material presence in England was a powerful

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reminder of the reemergence of Catholic monasticism after three centuries of suppression in Great Britain, motivating the virulent anti-Catholic backlash against nuns that historians and literary critics have so frequently discussed.⁴ Yet, in spite of anti-Catholic sentiment, more than 10,000 women choose some form of religious life over the course of the nineteenth-century. By 1900, England and Wales alone boasted some 80 religious congregations and 513 convents.⁵

The exponential growth of religious communities during this period and the attention that the figure of the nun elicited in nineteenth-century literature and culture are well known, but neither the Romantic origins of the trope nor the historical conditions that helped to make this cultural transformation possible for so many women in England have been fully examined. This study illuminates the significance of the nun in Romantic literature and culture and, in particular, the cultural impact of the return to England of women's monasticism during the French Revolution. Past studies of the French emigration to England have focused primarily on the material lives of aristocratic, working class, and ecclesiastical refugees, but largely neglect nuns' experiences, as well as the impact they had on the surrounding culture.⁶ For example, historian Susan O'Brien notes that the migrations of nuns at the end of the eighteenth century "mark[ed] a new phase in the history of religious life in Britain."⁷ Yet these women's experiences *during* the Revolution, including their travels to and reception in England, and the ways in which their views and survival strategies were shaped by the popular literary and cultural discourses of the period have not been studied in concert with the works of Romantic-era writers who championed their cause.

Nuns arrived on English shores in the final decade of the eighteenth century because of the displacement of Catholic religious during the French Revolution and the Revolutionary Wars. The new French government had begun dismantling religious life as early as 1789; by 1792 conventual practice was illegal and most convents were closed.⁸ Throughout France, approximately 55,000 women religious, including 44,000 Catholic nuns, were expelled from their homes, becoming part of the larger Catholic diaspora that the Revolution initiated.⁹ By 1809, around 400 English nuns who belonged to 19 religious houses that had been founded in exile on the Continent, as well as several French religious groups, had migrated to England, seeking political asylum and sharing the émigré experience with other refugees.¹⁰

This study considers how British writers perceived refugee nuns before and after they were forced to leave their Continental homes in the 1790s. However, in addition to analyzing the ways that writers saw nuns and represented their struggles to readers, I also examine nuns' own perceptions of Revolution, displacement, and migration, drawing on their rich histories to address unanswered questions about Romantic-era women religious, who, like the palimpsest of the nun lurking behind the twilight in Brontë's epigraph, are often shadowed in silence. For instance, who were the individual women behind the corporate identity of nuns? How did forces within and outside of the community shape nuns' choices during the Revolutionary period? How did British writers construct women religious and for what purposes? Did nuns conform to or challenge cultural, national, and gendered stereotypes? What discourses did their often anxious English hosts invent

to normalize and valorize nuns' everyday presence? Did writers see religious communities as fragmented and vulnerable or as resilient and socially resourceful? What strategies did nuns use to build and consolidate their assets, as well as strengthen their social networks after displacement from the Continent? What part did writers and benefactors play in assisting them? This book endeavors to fill some of the gaps in the hitherto incomplete pre-history of the nineteenth-century nun by putting into dialogue literary texts, writings by nuns, and historical scholarship about them.

Literary scholarship has focused primarily on representations of nuns in British literature and culture, whereas analyses of the socio-political contexts that shaped real nuns' lives or written narratives from within the cloister have been largely left to historians.¹¹ For instance, in the eighteenth century, utopian fiction, which idealized life in a women's community, gained popularity, but literary studies of this fiction have made few connections to the real lives of women religious.¹² Literary scholars have also explored the ways in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers drew on images of nuns as incarcerated victims and eroticized objects forced into sexual and theological deviance, tropes that hark back to centuries of anti-Catholic propaganda.¹³ The actual historical agency of nuns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, on the other hand, has been recounted primarily by historians, such as Elizabeth Rapley, Susan O'Brien, and others, who have uncovered the various roles that women religious played in education and social services, as well as the opportunities for personal development afforded them by religious life.¹⁴

This study, in contrast, uses a synthetic approach, analyzing a variety of literary representations of nuns in genres such as travel writing, young adult literature, political pamphlets, literary reviews, poetry, journalism, and historical writings alongside nuns' own narratives in letters (written for private or public audiences outside of the community), corporate diaries and chronicles (written for members within the community), and documents addressed to the French government. This research strategy enables a nuanced exploration of the interplay between the perceptions of writers within the convent and those without. Outsiders, including Hester Thrale Piozzi, Augustin Barruel, Helen Maria Williams, Frances Burney, and the British press, provide fascinating insight into how political forces shaped late eighteenth-century writers' cultural attitudes towards women's monasticism. In fact, nuns' own narratives suggest that they often adroitly adapted to their hosts' views of them. The core methodology of this book is thus dialectical, putting nuns' voices into conversation with those of the Romantic writers who represented nuns' experiences to the wider reading public. Thus, my work explores the complex interface that took place between women religious and British society during a time critical to the survival of women's religious life.

Foregrounding a tradition of national hospitality to religious refugees was a central project of the British Romantic literature discussed here. Within this broader agenda, writers sought to honor and preserve in narrative form the memory of specific religious groups whose survival was highly uncertain. During the last decade of the eighteenth century, the figure of the nun became a highly politicized and

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feminized icon, personifying the dire effects that the Revolution had upon women religious after their mostly unsuccessful attempts at resistance. In some ways, the nun became a symbol of the vulnerability of the British nation itself. Thus Britons rallied from across the political spectrum to support religious refugees in opposition to the Revolution. Nuns' contemporary writings reveal their acute awareness of this political construction and show them grappling with the dual challenge of maintaining some semblance of communal integrity while simultaneously performing the collective role of grateful recipient on local and national levels. The various and even contradictory representations of nuns by Catholic and Protestant supporters, the British Press, and the government highlight the diverse ways in which different writers appropriated the figure of the nun to bolster individual and group agendas within the larger national project of countering the Revolution.

Toby Benis argues that emigrants in Romantic literature stood "helpless" amid a variety of political allegiances. They were "Hamlet-like figures who [had] no clear path laid out before them," their agency disabled in both France and England.¹⁵ Benis's statement may be true, in the sense that the figure of the nun could be manipulated to serve a myriad of literary and political ends, but real nuns defied stereotypes and challenged easy assumptions. English nuns, in particular, did not fit neatly into gothic, nationalist, foreign, or anti-Jacobin frameworks. Moreover, although writers interpreted monastic culture in the service of a variety of personal and political agendas, nuns' own writings illuminate the very real practical—rather than ideological—concerns that lay at the core of their struggles. Their stories of survival, produced for both internal and external audiences, were influenced by subjective experience and memory, as well as a sensitivity to these audiences, who were often powerful patrons and allies.¹⁶ Finally, their narratives offer further insights into the ways in which an elite English Catholic minority shouldered the burden of taking care of cloistered family members and friends, who were returning not as isolated refugees, but in groups of various sizes and as members of even larger communities.

This analysis of multiple narratives from within and outside of the cloister emphasizes the permeable nature of monastic enclosure, as well as the importance of social networks, both of which allowed nuns to participate more fully in the public sphere than is generally assumed. Nuns were often active agents in determining courses of action for their communities. And beyond simply resisting and responding to the intrusions of the outside world, nuns also acted in response to occurrences *within* the cloister, such as the death of a revered member, in ways that could lead to a series of profound changes for their communities.

Such an analysis debunks the tendency, as common today as it was in the late eighteenth century, to assume that nuns' corporate identities define them and that distinctions between groups of nuns are minimal. On the contrary, collective narratives from within communities of women religious, as well as nuns' individual stories during the Revolution, reveal a wide variety of experiences of displacement and resettlement. Because real nuns defied outsiders' preconceived ideas about their nationality, age, politics, and sensibilities, contemporary writers' direct

engagement with them was central to the task of making their lives comprehensible and sympathetic to readers, thus enabling both a cultural exchange and a reevaluation of stereotypes. Though they did not all support nuns in the financial and practical ways that on-the-ground Protestant and Catholic benefactors could, writers participated in refugee assistance by becoming literary benefactors, using their rhetorical skills to mitigate potentially negative public sentiments towards nuns at a time when they desperately needed public assistance. Thus, this research endeavors to deepen our understanding of the “complex ways to emplacement,” in England and beyond that refugee nuns undertook after their expulsion from the Continent, as well as the ways in which a diverse literary culture assisted and complicated their transition.¹⁷

In order to familiarize the reader with some of the key points along the trajectory that nuns followed and that this book will trace—from settled pre-Revolution monastic life to displacement, migration, and resettlement in England—it will be useful to offer a broad overview of the socio-political contexts that framed this extraordinary odyssey. In the next two sections of this Introduction, therefore, I will briefly outline English nuns’ histories after the English Reformation, the impact of the French Revolution on women’s monasticism, and the reception and challenges faced by religious refugees in Britain.

Women’s Monasticism: The English Reformation to the French Revolution

Until recently, histories of Catholic monasticism have not focused exclusively on nuns, though their inclusion at all suggests a long-standing fascination with their culture among readers.¹⁸ O’Brien contends that the “historical invisibility” of nuns, like that of other groups of women, has been intensified because “a spirit of humility and self-forgetfulness” has long been a major objective within women’s religious culture.¹⁹ Despite this tendency, however, recent works, such as Claire Walker’s *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe*, Nicky Hallett’s *The Senses in Religious Communities 1600–1800*, Elizabeth Rapley’s *A Social History of the Cloister*, and Jo Ann Kay McNamara’s *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia*, have brought attention to nuns’ lives and experiences.²⁰

Narratives and other documents written by nuns have not always been available to mainstream audiences, and many remain that way. During the Revolution, a number of convent libraries and archives were destroyed, lost, or scattered across France, Belgium, England, and elsewhere. Most of the documents that do survive are sequestered in local record offices, libraries, private collections, and conventual archives not readily accessible to the public. Nevertheless, some communities of nuns have published their own histories, making them available to a general readership, and increasingly nuns are responsive to researchers who wish to study and present women’s monastic culture to audiences outside of the convent.²¹ The Catholic Record Society has published both historical research on English nuns, as well as narrative histories from within their communities.²² Research emerging from the *Who Were the Nuns?* database, hosted by Queen Mary University of

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London and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, has revitalized scholarly investigation into the lives of exiled English nuns, and many examples of nuns' own writings can be found in the six-volume *English Nuns in Exile, 1600–1800*, as well as in other sources.²³ The examination of how British history and literature have been shaped by Catholic women is thus becoming an increasingly exciting arena for scholarly investigation.²⁴

The history of English exiled nuns begins with the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, two years after Parliament pronounced Henry VIII to be the Supreme Head of the Church of England. This process continued through 1539; as McNamara explains, “monasteries represented an untapped and virtually undefended source of wealth waiting to be exploited.”²⁵ Dispossessed religious regrouped on the Continent; some joined foreign establishments, while others waited until more permanent settlement was possible. By 1600, the English Bridgettines were settled in Lisbon and there was an English Benedictine abbey in Brussels. Over the course of the seventeenth century, across the Continent, 22 contemplative English convents were founded, managed, and inhabited by Catholic women, primarily English and aristocratic.²⁶

The majority of nuns in these exiled convents claimed English descent, as Walker's research demonstrates, yet women from across the British archipelago and beyond, including those with Welsh, Scotch, Irish, French, Belgian, and American origins, participated in the formation and maintenance of communities based upon shared religious, political, national, and geographical ties. In addition, women from Belgium and France joined exiled English communities, usually as lay sisters.²⁷ Each English convent maintained a distinct English identity throughout the seventeenth-century, which connected it to its founder's original mission, countered British perceptions that nuns on the Continent were necessarily “foreign,” and kept alive nuns' determination to return home. Yet, according to historian Caroline Bowden, the “identities of the convents were subject to competing influences which might modify [their] original identities.”²⁸ Hence, although national ties remained important to the long-term success and broader agenda of English convents abroad, international and local connections made their survival possible and inflected convent culture in unique ways. Nuns managed a variety of social networks that ran across national, gendered, and ethnic lines. English convent schools educated local elites, while the practice of taking in distinguished lay women as boarders increased the social visibility of convents and attracted potential novices. Convents also forged ties with local governments, as well as with English royalty.²⁹

In spite of the deeply patriarchal nature of the Catholic Church, many nuns experienced much more autonomy than would have been possible in secular society. As revisionist historian Silvia Evangelisti argues, “monastic communities were places for female agency.”³⁰ The convent allowed many women in early modern Europe to experience levels of education and political, social, religious, and literary influence typically unavailable outside of the cloister. Walker makes the case that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English convents provided “an alternative to marriage and domestic religion, a place to educate the next

generation of Catholic wives and mothers . . . The religious houses represented their determination to develop non-conformity outside the dimension of the gentry household."³¹ By eschewing matrimony and motherhood, nuns could "dedicate themselves to the creation of a better society," according to French Revolution historian, Olwen H. Hufton.³²

Neither was religious life monolithic: it took various forms, providing diverse opportunities for women. For example, active congregations and *beguinages* were organizations that did not require solemn vows or enclosure and this elicited admiration from tourists such as Ann Radcliffe and Samuel Patterson.³³ Though diverse, eighteenth-century religious communities composed of women united by a shared mission fits Jane Rendall's definition of "feminist practice," as "the organization of a range of activities . . . around the claims of women to determine different areas of their lives."³⁴

While it imposed certain restrictions, the convent was also a space in which women could avoid the more pervasive patriarchal institution of marriage and its concomitant calls to domesticity and motherhood. Furthermore, women in convents could pursue the life of the mind; they conducted scholarship, transcribed manuscripts, and composed and published verse, drama, music, and devotional writings. Nuns were responsible for recording their communities' own histories in convent annals, diaries, and chronicles.³⁵ Nuns were women of influence: they ran infirmaries, boarded girls and lay women, and provided elite—in some cases free—education for girls while building and maintaining highly complex political, religious, and familial networks.³⁶

Life within Continental contemplative houses replicated external social class structures. Both Hester Thrale Piozzi and Helen Maria Williams purposefully downplay class differences in their writings about nuns, but a nun's status within the community mattered and it almost always depended on her origins: choir nuns were middle- or upper-class women who came with competitive dowries; lay sisters, women from the laboring classes, were essentially the equivalent of domestic servants. Thrale Piozzi and Williams provide evidence that class lines were occasionally crossed.³⁷ Nevertheless, class structures within eighteenth-century Continental convents were similar to those in the convents of nineteenth-century England and Wales, where, according to Barbara Walsh, "a convent household was no different from a large country house or a middle-class villa" in which there was an "endless round of chores performed by servants."³⁸

Neither were cloisters insulated from external economic and political forces. For example, French nuns saw their communities downsized over the course of the eighteenth century as King and Church worked hand-in-hand to streamline and economize existent women's monastic communities.³⁹ Few French nunneries were wealthy; many more were moderately poor. Yet because women's convents, unlike male monasteries, were far more embedded in and dependent upon regional economics and the local community, they displayed a surprising diversity in their practices and composition.⁴⁰ By the eighteenth century, the British had become eager tourists of this diversity, visiting a range of foreign and "native" convents.

Initially, upper-class British men began visiting convents during their Grand Tours; by the mid-eighteenth century, tourists of various rank could investigate monastic practice through travel.⁴¹

The Revolution would soon disrupt monastic culture so dramatically that nuns no longer had to be visited to be seen, either in print media or in person: they were big news. Hufton articulates the “stock image” of the nun propagated by revolutionary culture: she was “beautiful, fragile, abused, and in search of a man to solve her predicament.”⁴² In the early years of the Revolution, political rhetoric positioned concepts such as citizenship, liberty, and the “natural” family unit in opposition to monasticism. By October of 1789, religious candidates were not allowed to take vows and convents could not admit new entrants. In 1790, nuns were given the option to accept a pension, renounce their vows, and enter into secular society; most did not budge. The Assembly issued a decree dissolving convents and monasteries in February of 1791, although teaching and hospital congregations, as well as lay confraternities devoted to charitable works, were not banned until 1792.⁴³

Despite these legal restrictions, Gemma Betros points out that nuns in France made the “outright suppression” of religious groups difficult for authorities to effect because nuns “capitalized on the newly open political culture”: they put to use the rhetoric of liberty and utility to justify their claims to maintain their religious practices. Indeed, in this respect they were similar to women outside of the cloister, who also used revolutionary terminology to engage in political resistance when women were denied citizenship in June of 1793. Joan Landes reveals that revolutionary politics and philosophy circumvented French women’s demands for political representation, which had swelled in the eighteenth century, effectively relegating them to the domestic realm, all the while projecting a feminized image of “Liberty” in popular culture. What was at stake was a struggle over the very vocabulary of the Revolution and who had a right to claim it.⁴⁴ Through writing and activism, nuns also defended their culture from further encroachments; they exploited the perceptions that others had of them and employed the rhetoric of their erstwhile political opponents.

The petitions nuns wrote are among the surviving *cahiers de doléance*, the lists of grievances compiled by the *Estates-General*, which convened on May 5, 1789. These documents prove that nuns proactively defended their way of life.⁴⁵ Both English and French nuns petitioned the government in the early 1790s, using the rhetoric of citizenship and loyalty to the nation in order to remain in community on French soil.⁴⁶ According to Hufton, the Revolution threatened the “destruction or jeopardy of an entire set of highly complex networks” between various groups of women religious.⁴⁷ That nuns so actively defended themselves, through writing and direct contact with officials, reveals not only their commitment to religious life, but also their conviction that their voices should be heard.

Nuns’ efforts were hardly a match for the brutal force of the new French government though, and nuns would soon be forced to abandon their monastic homes in fear for their lives. Although English communities had been exempt from the legislation forcing them to disband until 1793—the year France declared war on

England—within the next 12 months, multiple groups of English nuns migrated to England. At first some remained on the Continent, attempting to recoup losses and wait out the political turmoil, even though staying behind resulted in imprisonment. By 1795, however, regulations were loosened and English nuns remaining in France were set free, initiating another round of migrations to England (see Table I.1).⁴⁸

Traveling across a war-torn Continent, in small or large cohorts, nuns sought political asylum in countries willing to host them. Nuns' tales of dispersal and escape from France appealed strongly to British readers because their stories included violence, plunder, imprisonment, starvation, and journeys that could well prove fatal, particularly to the sick and elderly. Non-fictional and fictional accounts of dispossessed religious were also ideologically attractive since monastic orders were predicated on the notion of corporate and individual inviolability. Anti-Catholic literary fantasies of women religious imagined revolutionary invasions of sacred spaces as liberating for the women within. However, the displacements nuns underwent during this period were not journeys of escape from conventual incarceration, but forced removals, threatening the integrity of both individual and collective bodies by stripping away the protection of the convent's walls.⁴⁹

Table I.1 Nuns' Migrations to England during the French Revolution

<i>Location/Date Founded</i>	<i>Institute</i>	<i>Migration to England</i>
Montargis/1630	French Benedictines	1792
Bruges/1629	English Augustinians	1794
Louvain/1609	English Augustinians	1794
Brussels/c. 1597–1599	English Benedictines	1794
Cambrai/1623	English Benedictines	1795
Dunkirk/1662	English Benedictines	1795
Ghent/1624	English Benedictines	1794
Paris/c. 1651–1653	English Benedictines	1795
Lisbon/1594	English Bridgettines	1809
Antwerp/c. 1618–1619	English Carmelites	1794
Hoogstraten/1678	English Carmelites	1795
Lierre/1648	English Carmelites	1794
Paris/1658–1660	English Conceptionists/Blue Nuns	1800
Brussels/c. 1660–1661	English Dominicans	1794
Brussels/1619	English Franciscans	1794
Aire/1629	English Poor Clares	1799
Dunkirk/1625	English Poor Clares	1795
Gravelines/c. 1609	English Poor Clares	1795
Rouen/1644	English Poor Clares	1795
Liege/1642	English Sepulchrines	1794
Douai	French Bernardines	1795
Cambrai	French Salesians	unknown
Cambrai	French Hospitalières	unknown

Source: Adapted from *English Convents in Exile*, vol. 6, p. xvii and *Who Were the Nuns?* database, <<http://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/>> accessed Feb. 9, 2016.