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Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture / Jenna Lay

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Jenna Lay. *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 256 pp.

Reviewed by TESSIE PRAKAS

In *Beyond the Cloister*, Jenna Lay makes a powerful case for attending more closely to the Catholic Englishwomen who have been “erased” from our narrative of early modern literary production. Too many scholars have neglected, Lay contends, adequately to acknowledge the “literary effects and affects associated with the women who wrote from exilic, enclosed, recusant, and conformist perspectives” (171), a neglect that stems largely from the tendency of these women’s contemporaries to ignore or denigrate them on social, political, and theological grounds. In failing to identify or to question this tendency, Lay suggests, we hobble our own attempts to enlarge our understanding of the early modern English literary landscape. *Beyond the Cloister* argues that we ought, instead, to inquire into the relationship of canonical works to lesser-known texts written by and about Catholic women, in part because these texts deserve to be better known in their own right, and in part because such inquiry sheds light on the considerable influence that women (enclosed and otherwise) exerted on the production of the more renowned works of the period—influence that is sometimes most evident, Lay suggests, in women’s apparent absence from or marginalization within them.

The title of Lay’s book gestures to the several goals of the subsequent chapters in “trac[ing] a circuitous path through English literary history” (1), emphasizing both the capacity of cloistered women to move, as characters in the early modern popular imagination, beyond the walls in which they were physically enclosed, and the value for us of reading early modern texts whose central concerns seem to range far beyond the cloister nonetheless as commentaries on monastic enclosure. This emphasis lays the groundwork first for reading the depictions of chastity and virginity in texts including *The Faerie Queene*, *Hero and Leander*, and *Measure for Measure* as pointing not only to Queen Elizabeth’s own famously virginal status, but to the shifting signification of marriage itself in late Elizabethan England. Lay’s argument here dwells both on the legacy of female monasticism and on the increased visibility of married recusant women such as Margaret Clitherow, and her use of John Mush’s “A True Report of the Life and Martyrdom of Mrs. Margaret Clitherow” to undergird some of the chapter’s central claims about Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare is a strong example of how the recontextualization that the book calls for bears interpretative fruit. Here and in subsequent chapters, Lay’s careful juxtaposition of more and less canonical works makes the case, strongly yet subtly, for a reassessment not only of the particular texts in question, but also of how we conceptualize the workings of literary influence in early modernity.

Form is central to Lay’s discussion of this influence. *Beyond the Cloister* asks us to be attentive to how authors’ formal and material decisions might themselves

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reflect the social pressures attendant on Catholic women or, indeed, the ways in which male authors and characters attempted to *produce* such pressure. That Lay considers a range of texts including not only printed poetry and plays but also letters, pamphlets, and devotional writings in both manuscript and print is a powerful demonstration of what the rigorous materialism that she explicitly advocates might look like, and this materialism is united with an equally rigorous formalism in her readings of these texts. Perhaps the most compelling of Lay's examples—beyond the “flurry of chiasmus” (54) that concludes *Measure for Measure*—is the anonymous response to Thomas Robinson's *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon* produced by the Bridgettine nuns of Lisbon, formerly of Syon Abbey. In this manuscript response, Lay suggests, the sophisticated deployment of literary form became a weapon that the nuns used consciously and purposively to rebut Robinson's numerous slurs against them. The Lisbon convent is an important case study for Lay in demonstrating the rich potential of the early modern cloister as a generative, vibrant locus for literary creation, as is the appealing “conjunction of female community and sociable artistic production” (144) within the convents depicted by Marvell and Cavendish in *Upon Appleton House* and *The Convent of Pleasure*. At the same time, Marvell's careful curtailing of that appeal, like Robinson's condemnation of the Bridgettine nuns, supports Lay's larger contention that male authors who wished to undermine the integrity of female monasticism did so in part by negating the convent's importance as a space for female literary production.

That contention is a powerful and an important one, and is essential both to the historical argument of the book and to its assessment of the approach that critics have tended to take toward the authors at its center. Yet both parts of this project would be even more compelling, I suggest, if Lay did not use the language of “erasure” quite so widely to describe responses to Catholic women and their writing, both in early modernity and more recently. Such language invites some association with Heidegger's and Derrida's formulations of erasure, but this is not, I think, an association that Lay wishes to pursue. More pressingly, this terminology in some ways limits the capacity of Lay's project to describe the *variety* of ways in which these women have disappeared from English literary history. Since analyzing precisely the nature of these disappearances—and thus bringing to light the figures thus “erased”—is essential to the book's undertaking, it might achieve that all the more fully by relying on a broader and more granulated range of terms. Lay's reading of *The Duchess of Malfi* demonstrates this particularly acutely. Both the attempts by the Duchess's brothers to constrain her behavior and her opposing them through a secret marriage appear, in this reading, to gesture obliquely toward Catholic enclosure in order to expose it to critique. Even while the Duchess might be read as a figure for Protestant resistance against the excesses of the Catholic faith, she remains linked with the latter—as does Julia, who is herself destroyed by them. Lay suggests that Webster's play thus stages a series of efforts to “mar the reputation of monastic life without mentioning it directly” (64), but such oblique criticism is not, I would suggest, quite the same as erasure. Precisely because Lay's authors vary in their attitudes toward Catholic women—sometimes demonizing, sometimes diminishing, and sometimes ignoring them

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altogether—the fullness of the landscape with which she provides us might emerge even more crisply if defined in a fuller range of terms.

Such a suggestion, though, is not intended to detract from the importance of the critical intervention that Lay undertakes here, nor from the effectiveness with which she achieves it. Both in offering rigorous and suggestive new readings of familiar works by setting them in less familiar literary and cultural contexts, and in claiming fuller consideration for those contexts on their own terms, *Beyond the Cloister* is a valuable addition to, and prompt to further reflection on, the extant scholarship on early modern Catholic women.

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