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Visualising the Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Nuns' Letters

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Abstract

This article applies network analysis tools to letters written by and about English Benedictine nuns living in Brussels during the seventeenth century in order to demonstrate the ways in which such an approach expands our picture of early modern religious communities, makes visible the protagonists of religious controversy, and advances debates about enclosure and anonymity. The dataset for this network analysis is taken from the RECIRC project database (the project is entitled “The Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women’s Writing, 1550-1700” <http://recirc.nuigalway.ie/>). The RECIRC project is producing a large-scale quantitative analysis of the ways in which women’s writing was received and circulated in the early modern English-speaking world; its database will be open-access from the project’s close. The project has captured reception data on a range of female-authored sources, including texts produced in English convents established in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The metadata



extracted from the nuns' letters that form the basis of this study have generated 1,188 reception records, each tracing a connection between a female author and a receiver. Network analysis is shown here to illuminate debates about the nature and extent of enclosure imposed upon early modern nuns, as well as the sheer breadth and diversity of their epistolary relationships. Furthermore, it exposes otherwise invisible protagonists in religious controversy, and progresses methodological debates about the presentation of data relating to anonymity.

1 Introduction*

Scholars such as Ruth Ahnert, Sebastian E. Ahnert, Evan Bourke and Ingeborg van Vugt have pioneered the application of network analysis tools to early modern sources. Ahnert and Ahnert used quantitative network analysis tools to visualise and analyse the Protestant correspondence networks that operated in England during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary I (1553-58). Based on metadata extracted from 289 letters written either to or by Protestants living in England between 1553 and 1558, their study revealed hitherto overlooked individuals (many of them women) who were fundamental to the operation of the network and, thus, to upholding Protestant resistance in Marian England.¹ Drawing on a corpus of more than 4,000 letters, Bourke employed network analysis tools to assess the importance of female involvement in the Hartlib circle, an intellectual correspondence network formed in London in 1641. His results revealed that women such as Dorothy Moore Dury (c.1613-64) and Katherine Jones (1615-91), Viscountess Ranelagh, were integral to the network despite having been

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¹ Ruth Ahnert and Sebastian E. Ahnert, "Protestant Letter Networks in the Reign of Mary I: A Quantitative Approach," *English Literary History* 82:1 (2015): 1-33. See also: Ruth Ahnert, "Maps Versus Networks," in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Noah Moxham and Joad Raymond (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 130-57. Ahnert and Ahnert's current project, "Tudor Networks of Power, 1509-1603" (<http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH/Moo4171/1>), involves reconstructing correspondence networks based on metadata contained in the *State Papers Online* archive. See Ruth Ahnert and Sebastian E. Ahnert, "Reconstructing Correspondence Networks in the State Papers Archive", unpublished paper delivered at "Reception, Reputation and Circulation in the Early Modern World" conference held at the National University of Ireland, Galway, 22-25 March 2017. Online podcast available at: <https://soundcloud.com/mooreinstitute/ruth-ahnert-and-sebastian-ahnert?in=mooreinstitute/sets/reception-reputation-and-circulation>.

previously overlooked in most scholarship on the Hartlib circle.² Building on the extensive work already conducted on epistolary networks that made up the Republic of Letters, van Vugt argued for the importance of employing a multi-layered network approach in order to represent more accurately the hybrid and complex nature of historical epistolary networks.³ Her study advocated a “disclose” reading methodology which combines quantitative, distant reading practices with qualitative, close reading of sources. Such a combination is reflected in this network analysis of early modern English nuns’ letters.⁴

In tandem with developments in the field of network analysis, the last decade has witnessed a proliferation in scholarship on the English convents in exile. Proscription of formal religious communities in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation in England resulted in the foundation of 22 enclosed English convents in Europe during the period 1598 to 1700; 21 of these were established as new foundations in locations across France and Spanish Flanders (in what is now modern-day Belgium) while one, the Brigittines of Syon Abbey, a medieval foundation, ultimately settled in Lisbon, Portugal.⁵ The majority of these convents remained in operation on the Continent until the late eighteenth century when the turmoil of the French Revolution forced their disbandment. Thanks to the work of recent editorial and prosopographical projects, most notably the pioneering “Who Were the Nuns?” project, led by Caroline Bowden (Queen Mary University of London), an abundance of sources produced by and about members of these English convents has been made available, both online and in print.⁶ This has, in turn, expanded considerably our knowledge of the nature of contemplative

² Evan Bourke, “Female Involvement, Membership and Centrality: A Social Network Analysis of the Hartlib Circle,” *Literature Compass* 14:4 (2017): 1-17.

³ See “Mapping the Republic of Letters” (<http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>), “Circulation of Knowledge/ePistolarium” (<http://ckcc.huygens.knaw.nl/>), and “Cultures of Knowledge: Networking the Republic of Letters, 1550-1750” (<http://www.culturesofknowledge.org/>).

⁴ Ingeborg van Vugt, “Using Multi-Layered Networks to Disclose Books in the Republic of Letters,” *Journal of Historical Network Research* 1 (2017): 25-51. This methodological approach is also advocated by Ruth Ahnert, who argues that “network analysis provides valuable navigation for close reading”. See “Tudor Networks of Power, 1509-1603, project abstract” (<http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH/M004171/1>).

⁵ Claire Walker’s pioneering study of the English convents in exile offers a foundational analysis of the establishment and growth of these communities: Claire Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁶ “Who Were the Nuns?: A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile 1600-1800” (<http://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/>, hereafter WWTN). This Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) funded project took place between 2008 and 2013. The project recovered a wealth of archival documentation on the English convents in exile. The project database holds prosopographical records of over 4,000 women who joined 22 convents established across Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Each individual in the database has been assigned their own unique identifiers (UIDs).

life for women who left England to join convents established in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷

The English Benedictine Convent of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady – the subject of the present article – was the first English convent to be established on the Continent after the Reformation. It was founded in 1598 by Lady Mary Percy (c.1570-1642). She was one of four daughters of Thomas Percy (1528-72), seventh earl of Northumberland, an Elizabethan martyr executed due to his involvement in the 1569 Northern Rising.⁸ In 1616, at the age of forty-six, Percy was elected abbess of the Brussels convent, a position she retained until her death in 1642. During her lifetime, Percy gained a not insignificant reputation as an author and, as Jaime Goodrich has highlighted, she was closely involved in a number of projects to translate devotional works into English for use by the English community in exile.⁹ In addition to her activities as a translator, Percy was a prolific letter-writer as were her fellow Benedictine nuns in Brussels. Numerous letters penned by her and other members of the Brussels community survive and are currently housed in the Archive of the Archdiocese of Mechelen (hereafter AAM).¹⁰

2 The dataset

The letters produced by Percy and the English Benedictine nuns provide the basis for this network analysis. They were written over the course of the seventeenth century and were sent to the Flemish Archbishops of Mechelen and their secretaries. The English nuns were writing to the Flemish archbishops because, when the Brussels convent was established in 1598, the new English Benedictine congregation had not yet been restored and therefore the community was placed under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Archbishops of Mechelen. The letters vary in form and content. However, the majority relate to a series of on-going disputes that emerged within the convent during the 1620s

⁷ For a general introduction see, Caroline Bowden and James E. Kelly, eds., *The English Convents in Exile, 1600-1800: Communities, Culture and Identity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

⁸ Caroline Bowden, "Percy, Lady Mary (c.1570-1642), Abbess of the Convent of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady, Brussels," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter ODNB) [<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/66980>, accessed 9 Nov. 2017].

⁹ For example, in collaboration with the English Jesuit, Anthony Hoskins (d.1615), Percy was responsible for the translation, from a French edition, of Achilles Galhardi's *Breve compendio intorno alla perfezione Cristiana* (*An Abridgement of Christian Perfection*), published in 1612. See Jaime Goodrich, "Translating Lady Mary Percy: Authorship and Authority among the Brussels Benedictines," in *English Convents in Exile*, 109-22.

¹⁰ Archief van het Aartsbisdom Mechelen (AAM), Mechelen, Belgium, Regulieren Brussel, Engelse Nonnen, Doos 12/1-12/3, unfoliated. Today this archive is held in the Diocesan Pastoral Centre in Mechelen, a city located between Brussels and Antwerp in northern Belgium.

and 1630s which were to last until the mid-seventeenth century.¹¹ The disputes were complex and multifaceted but the main issue of contention centred on Abbess Percy's refusal to allow Jesuit confessors minister to the community (a confessor was a priest appointed to hear the nuns' confessions and was responsible for their spiritual welfare).¹² Since its establishment in 1598, the Brussels convent had benefited from a close relationship with a succession of prominent Jesuits, among them Anthony Hoskins, vice-prefect in Flanders (1610-13) and John Norton, procurator (financial manager) of the Jesuit province (1610-23), while the role of confessor to the convent was traditionally held by a member of that order.¹³ A combination of personality clashes and power struggles within the Brussels house meant that relations between the abbess and the Jesuits steadily deteriorated during the 1620s. This ultimately led to the emergence of distinct factions within the community: a "pro-Percy" faction (those who sided with the abbess) and an "anti-Percy" faction (those who wanted Jesuit priests, or priests sympathetic to the Jesuit order, to continue in their traditional role as confessors).¹⁴

Data from 405 letters containing reception evidence and written between 1609 and 1693 has been entered in the RECIRC project database from the AAM. Of these, 359 are original letters while 46 are translations. Translations are instances where a letter written in English by one of the nuns was translated into French or Latin, in order that it could be understood by their Flemish superiors.¹⁵

¹¹ The Brussels convent disputes have received significant scholarly attention: see Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe*, 138-42; Jaime Goodrich, "Authority, Gender, and Monastic Piety: Controversies at the English Benedictine Convent in Brussels, 1620-1623," *British Catholic History* 33 (2016): 91-114; Emilie K.M. Murphy, "Language and Power in an English Convent in Exile, c.1621-c.1631," *The Historical Journal* (Forthcoming): 1-25 [; Paul Arblaster, "The Monastery of Our Lady of the Assumption in Brussels (1599-1794)," *English Benedictine History Symposium* 17 (1999): 54-77. For an account of similar disputes that emerged in English Poor Clare convents, see Marie-Louise Coolahan, "Archipelagic Identities in Europe: Irish Nuns in English Convents," in *English Convents in Exile*, 211-28, and Caroline Bowden, "The English Convents in Exile and Questions of National Identity, c.1600-1688," in *British and Irish Emigrants and Exiles in Europe*, ed., David Worthington (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), 297-314.

¹² The statutes of the Brussels convent, approved in 1612, granted varying amounts of authority to key office holders, among them the convent confessor (called the ordinary confessor) who was appointed by the archbishop and whose duties included providing spiritual guidance, celebrating Mass, and hearing weekly confessions. The convent also had access to "extraordinary" confessors who were appointed either by the archbishop or the abbess. Their role was to provide additional spiritual counsel and hear confessions; "The Third Parte of Those Matters ... externally appertayning to the Congregation," *Statutes Compyled for the Better Observation of the Most Glorious Father and Patriarch S. Benedict* (Ghent, 1632), 4-6. I am grateful to Jaime Goodrich for sharing a copy of the statutes.

¹³ Goodrich, "Authority, Gender, and Monastic Piety", 95.

¹⁴ For an outline of the various factions that emerged within the community during the early 1620s see, Goodrich, "Authority, Gender, and Monastic Piety", 91-114.

¹⁵ For an extended discussion regarding the translation of the Brussels nuns' letters see, Murphy, "Language and Power".

The data fields used to build the dataset for the network analysis that follows are taken from the RECIRC database. These are best illustrated by an example; a letter written on 8 April 1623 by Mary Vavasour (d.1676), a member of the Brussels convent, to the Archbishop of Mechelen, Jacobus Boonen (d.1651).¹⁶ In her letter, Vavasour, who was one of the ringleaders of the "anti-Percy" faction, outlined the divisions that had emerged within the community due to a growing rift between Abbess Percy and the convent confessor, Father Robert Chambers (1571-1628).¹⁷ Vavasour reported: "The cheefest cause of all our inconvenience (as I conceive) is the very great difference between my Lady [Percy] and Father Chambers". Vavasour went on to give a lengthy account of Percy's alleged misconduct and accused her of creating an atmosphere of distrust among the nuns:

My Lady ... adviseth not in matters of government ... [she] is so easely disgusted, and taketh the Religious [the nuns] so short when they differ in judgment from her ... my Ladyes jelowse inquiry after some, hath caused so great disunion of minds, and mistrustfull looking in to one another[']s actions.¹⁸

Vavasour's letter thus constitutes a reception of Abbess Mary Percy. It was first entered as a 'Reception Source Work' (hereafter RSW) in the RECIRC database. An RSW is a work or document in which evidence of the reception of a female author and/or her work is found. For each reception of a female author that occurs within a specific RSW, a separate reception entry is created. Since Vavasour's letter contained only one instance of reception (her account of Mary Percy), one corresponding reception record was created.¹⁹

This reception record contains the following data fields: "Female Author" (the female author being received or, as here, the female author written about in the letter), in this case Mary Percy; "Receiver" (the person doing the receiving or, in other words, the person referring to the female author), in this case Mary Vavasour. It is important to note that "Receiver" here does not mean letter recipient. Instead "Receiver" refers to the person who is writing about (or receiving/engaging with) the female author. As well as capturing the

¹⁶ Originally from York, Vavasour entered the Brussels convent in 1611 and was professed in 1616 at the age of 17. In 1652 she was elected abbess of the Brussels house, and retained this office until her death in 1676. Biographical information courtesy of WWTN (UID BB186). Boonen, who hailed from Antwerp, was appointed archbishop of Mechelen in 1621 and remained in that office until his death in 1655. For a brief discussion of Boonen's career see Craig Harline and Eddy Putt, *A Bishop's Tale: Mathias Hovius Among his Flock in Seventeenth-Century Flanders* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 285, 290.

¹⁷ Chambers occupied the position of confessor to the Brussels nuns from 1599: Paul Arblaster, "Chambers, Robert (1571-1628), Roman Catholic Priest," in *ODNB* [<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5077>, accessed 18 Nov. 2017].

¹⁸ "Marie Vavasour [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen], 8 April 1623", AAM, Doos 12/2.

¹⁹ While in this case, the RSW contained only one instance of reception, other RSWs might have multiple instances of reception and will, thus, have multiple reception entries linked to them.

relationship between an individual female author and a receiver, each reception record features information about the type of reception that has occurred. In the RECIRC database, reception has been classified according to particular types, ranging from adaptation, dedication and extended commentary through to reference to named author, transcription and translation. In this instance, Mary Vavasour's report about Percy is captured as "reference to named author" and "extended commentary". Finally, the archival reference for the AAM was entered into the reference field, in order to link the letter back to its original repository. The metadata extracted from the 405 letters in the AAM has generated 1,188 reception records. In summary, the two pertinent categories in the dataset for the network analysis that follows are "Female Author" and "Receiver".

There are, of course, limitations to the dataset. Firstly, the data has been filtered through the lens of reception, which means that only letters that contain reception evidence have been gathered in the RECIRC database, in keeping with the aims and scope of the project. Thus, data gathered from this archive is representative of letters that contain reception evidence rather than of the convent correspondence as a whole. Secondly, the Brussels correspondence has its own particular bias. The majority of the letters were sent *by* the nuns *to* the archbishops and their secretaries; thus, information flow is largely one-way. In most cases we do not have the replies that may or may not have been sent by the archbishops and other ecclesiastical figures to the nuns.²⁰ Moreover, it is likely that scores more letters were sent that do not survive (although this problem of attrition applies to all early modern archives).

3 Creating a reception network

The first step in creating this reception network was to extract all the individual reception records linked to the AAM from the project database and store them in JSON (JavaScript Object Notation) format. This data was then organised into two .CSV files in Excel: a nodes file (the female authors and receivers) and an edges file (the connections between them, i.e. the receptions). The edges were given attributes according to reception type, i.e. reference to named author, extended commentary, translation. These files were then imported to Gephi – an open-source network analysis and visualisation software tool – to analyse the network. Using Gephi, various visualisations of the Brussels Benedictine reception network were generated. In the first visualisation (Figure 1), each person is represented as a node and their connections are edges (the connections

²⁰ The exceptions are "Jacobus Boonen in Brussels to the Benedictine Monastery of the Glorious Assumption in Brussels, 30 September 1628", AAM, Doos 12/2, and "Jacobus Boonen in Brussels to the Benedictine Monastery of the Glorious Assumption in Brussels, 6 April 1632", AAM, Doos 12/1.

are receptions of female authors).²¹ There are in total one hundred nodes (people) and 536 edges (receptions) in this network. Of these one hundred people, 67 are nuns and 33 are non-nuns. The nodes have been partitioned by colour; nuns are represented in purple, non-nuns in orange. The layout is force-directed, meaning that the most connected nodes (those with the greatest number of edges) appear closer to the centre while those with the least connections appear at the periphery.²²

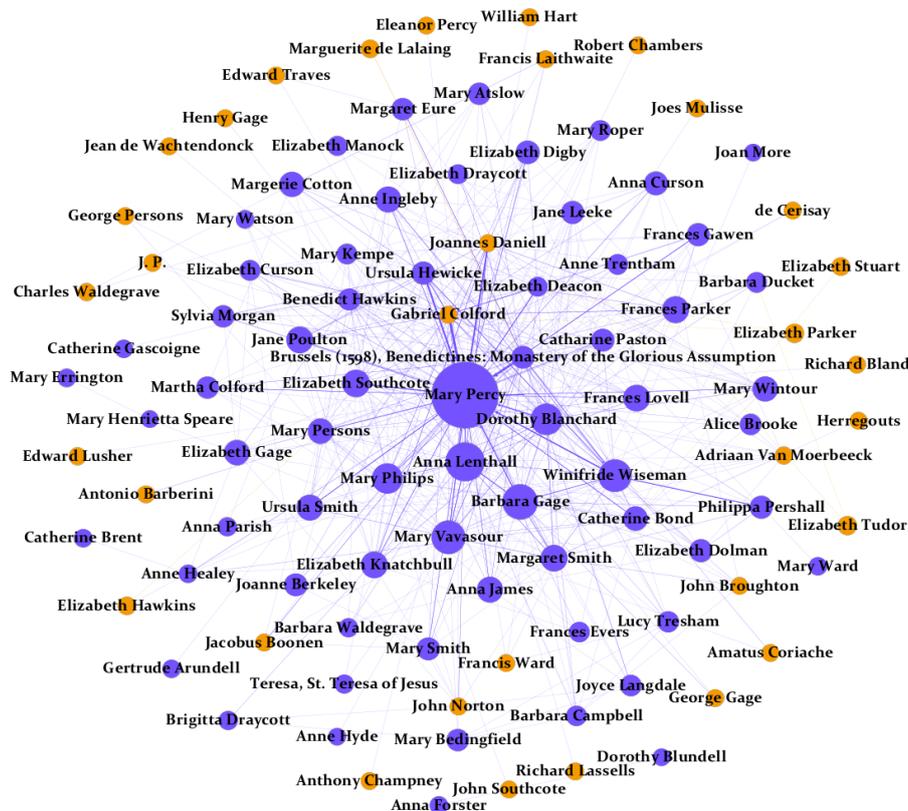


Figure 1: Brussels Benedictines Reception Network (ranked by in-degree).

²¹ In some respects, a reception network is similar to the co-citation networks discussed in studies by Yves Gingras. See Gingras, "Mapping the Structure of the Intellectual Field Using Citation and Co-Citation Analysis of Correspondences," *History of European Ideas* 36:3 (2010): 330-39.

²² The layout algorithm used to create the visualisations in this article is Fruchterman Reingold.

At the centre, with multiple edges radiating from her node, is Mary Percy. This is not surprising since, as discussed above, Percy was abbess of the convent between 1616 and 1642 and central to the disputes that emerged within the community during the 1620s and 1630s. Her centrality in the network thus validates the reliability of the analysis. As well as her central position in the network, Percy is also the largest node. This is because the nodes are ranked according to “in-degree”, meaning that the node size corresponds to the number of individual people a person is received by, i.e. how many people wrote about that individual or engaged with their writing in some way (e.g. by translating a letter). By ranking the nodes according to this statistical measurement, key agitators in the convent controversies thus become apparent.

When the top five in-degree nodes are calculated (Table 1), the results show that four out of five of the ranked individuals occupied key positions of authority as either abbess and/or prioress (second in command to the abbess) during their religious career in Brussels.

Node	In-Degree
Mary Percy	64
Anna Lenthall	28
Barbara Gage	23
Mary Vavasour	21
Winifride Wiseman	20

Table 1: Top five in-degree nodes (reception network).

They are Mary Percy, Anna Lenthall, Mary Vavasour and Winifride Wiseman. Percy’s case has already been explained. Her in-degree ranking of 64, more than double that of the next highest ranking node, again confirms what we might expect; she was central to the ongoing controversies in Brussels. Anna Lenthall and Winifride Wiseman, received by 28 and twenty people respectively, both occupied the office of prioress; Lenthall was prioress in 1639 while Wiseman occupied that office on three separate occasions: in 1628, 1630 and again in 1639.²³ Lenthall later went on to succeed Percy as abbess following the latter’s death in 1642 while Mary Vavasour, who was received by 21 people, became abbess of the Brussels house ten years later, in 1652.²⁴ Thus, all four occupied top positions of authority within the convent, which undoubtedly explains why they rank highly in terms of numbers of receivers. The outlier is Barbara Gage who was received by 23 people. Unlike the four nuns discussed above, at no point did she occupy the office of abbess or prioress, although she did hold a lower ranking office, that of portress (the convent doorkeeper) for just one year

²³ WWTN (UID BB199).

²⁴ WWTN (UIDs BB111 [Lenthall] and BB186 [Vavasour]).

in 1650.²⁵ Her relatively high in-degree ranking thus prompts further investigation.

A close reading of letters written about Gage reveals her role as a key agitator in the convent disputes and this corroborates her centrality in the reception network. Of the 23 people she is received by, two are priests, three are laymen and 17 are fellow nuns.²⁶ Of the 17 nuns who wrote about her, more than half portray her as a divisive individual who incited discord within the community. For example, in the early 1620s Gage was identified by Dorothy Blanchard as one who “greatly disturbs the quiet and charity of the house”.²⁷ Later in 1628, Ursula Smith identified Gage as one of two nuns who disrupted “the peace and true union” of the convent (the other nun implicated was Anne Ingleby).²⁸ In her lengthy epistle to Archbishop Boonen, Smith claimed that Gage and Ingleby were effectively employed by Percy as spies charged with monitoring the behaviour of other nuns (presumably those among the “anti-Percy” faction). They, in turn, used this position to further incite tensions within the community:

in thees parsones [persons] my Lady douth most confide implying them to see that [the] Rule and descipline be well observed them selves being noted to be the most des orderly [disorderly] and chefe brekers ther of ... what soever the[y] relate all though it be very falce my Lady giveth such credet unto it that with out any excamination she maketh the Religious [the nuns] to be accuse[d] in publik chapter and pennanced for it.²⁹

Not only did Gage’s “falce” reports initiate disharmony between Percy and the nuns, her actions also drove a wedge between the abbess and the prioress, Agatha Wiseman. Smith related how Gage, “in [a] most audatious and contemptious mannar called the Prioresse insolent woman ... 6 times before her face and ... [said] she would ackno[w]le[d]g[e] no superior but my Lady Abbesse”. Rather than reproaching her for her overt disregard of Wiseman’s authority, Smith reported that Percy took Gage’s part:

[instead] of mentaning the due respect and subjection which the Religious ... [ought] to bare to ... Superior[s] my Lady taking ... [Gage’s] parte ...

²⁵ WWTN (UID BB082).

²⁶ One of these 23 receivers is Gage herself. This is because Gage referred to an earlier letter she had sent to the archbishop in a letter dated 28 May 1638. This instance of self-reception is represented in the graph by the small arc beside Gage’s node. These arcs denoting self-reception are also visible on the nodes representing Mary Percy, Ursula Hewicke, Winifride Wiseman and Ursula Smith.

²⁷ “Dorothy Blanchard [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen], before 1624”, AAM, Doos 12/3.

²⁸ “Ursula Smith [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen], 3 August [1628]”, AAM, Doos 12/1.

²⁹ “Ursula Smith [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen], 3 August [1628]”, AAM, Doos 12/1.

condemning the Prioress to have doun foolishly which wardes she oftoun itterated.³⁰

As well as levelling verbal insults at the prioress and provoking conflict between Percy and other nuns, Gage was accused of theft. On 24 April 1629 Elizabeth Southcote wrote to Boonen, reporting that some of her letters to the archbishop (which she kept in a small box under lock and key) were stolen on the orders of Percy by Gage and three other nuns.³¹ The fact that Southcote (who was part of the anti-Percy group) was compelled to keep her letters to the archbishop under lock and key demonstrates the growing atmosphere of distrust that pervaded the convent as discord between factions escalated. While Gage played a central role in fuelling that discord, Percy herself was clearly not beyond reproach.

Gage's case reveals the complexities of the power relations in operation in the Brussels convent. As the above examples illustrate, her role as an agitator of controversy was facilitated and indeed promoted by Abbess Percy, who conferred on her a degree of unofficial status that undermined convent hierarchical and behavioural norms. This meant that her actions were frequently commented on by other nuns who portrayed her as a subversive individual; that her behaviour generated receptions (in our terms). The network analysis thus draws our attention to an otherwise unremarked protagonist, and this expands our understanding of the ways in which the disputes played out. However, since five of Gage's 23 receivers were not, in fact, members of the community, the network analysis also reveals how reports about convent controversies and the women involved in them spread beyond the convent walls. This has major implications for our understanding of the role of enclosure in early modern convents.

4 Network analysis and convent enclosure

During the early modern period, the Catholic Church imposed strict enclosure (or *clausura*) on all female religious.³² Enclosure entailed the nuns' physical separation from society within the convent cloister and the severing of all worldly and familial ties. Convent statutes emphasised the importance of preserving enclosure, which could be undermined by contact with the outside

³⁰ "Ursula Smith [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen], 3 August [1628]", AAM, Doos 12/1.

³¹ "Elizabeth Southcote [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen], 24 April 1629", AAM, Doos 12/1.

³² Claire Walker, "'Doe not Suppose me a Well Mortified Nun Dead to the World': Letter-Writing in Early Modern English Convents," in *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing 1450-1700*, ed., James Daybell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 159-76; Francesca Medioli, "An Unequal Law: The Enforcement of *Clausura* before and after the Council of Trent," in *Women in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe*, ed., Christine E. Meek (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 136-52; *eadem*, "The Dimensions of the Cloister: Enclosure, Constraint, and Protection in Seventeenth-Century Italy," in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, eds, Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 165-80.

world. Thus, the statutes of the Brussels Benedictines decreed that contact with families should be restricted because “a Religious person ought to be very sparing in that kinde, as benign [*sic*] one dead to the world, and that desyreth onely to live to Christ alone”.³³ Recent scholarship on early modern convents has pointed to the tensions that existed between the ideal of preserving enclosure and the reality of daily life for women who entered conventual life. Demonstrating the “permeability” of early modern convents, scholars such as Claire Walker and Elizabeth Leffeldt have highlighted the interactions of cloisters with the worlds beyond their walls.³⁴ This network analysis contributes to that debate by visually mapping the connections maintained by the Brussels Benedictines with a diverse range of individuals, both in and beyond Spanish Flanders. Furthermore, the network visualisations graphically illustrate the scope of the nuns' networks. While the majority of the orange nodes are figures we might expect to see in the network – for example, bishops and priests charged with various aspects of the convent's governance (Jacobus Boonen, Robert Chambers, Anthony Champney [1569-1644]) – there are also a number of lay people featured, many of whom were family members of the nuns. Individuals such as Elizabeth Parker, Eleanor Percy, Elizabeth Hawkins, George Persons, Henry Gage and John Southcote, wrote letters either to or about their cloistered relations.

Quantitative research reveals the reach of the nuns' connections; qualitative research shows how their lay relatives both in and beyond Spanish Flanders intervened in convent affairs. A case in point is Elizabeth Parker *née* Tresham (1573-1647/8), the mother of Frances Parker who joined the Brussels convent c.1622. Elizabeth, a staunch Catholic, was the wife of William Parker (d. 1622), Baron Monteagle, and a sister of the Gunpowder plot conspirator, Francis Tresham (d. 1605).³⁵ From the Monteagle family residence in Essex, Elizabeth maintained correspondence with her daughter and intervened when she considered the terms of Parker's profession punitive (profession was the act of taking full religious vows). Because Parker suffered from an infirmity, her profession was subject to certain stipulations that denied her the full rights and privileges enjoyed by other choir nuns (choir nuns were those who had taken full religious vows). Among other conditions, Parker could not hold a rank in the house commensurate with her age of profession, nor could she wear the same habit worn by other choir nuns. When Parker's mother became aware of the sanctions imposed against her daughter she was outraged, writing “letters

³³ “The First Parte of the Statutes of Those Things That Appertayne to common Disciolyne”, *Statutes Compyled for the Better Observation*, 38.

³⁴ For a concise overview of such scholarship see Elizabeth A. Leffeldt, “The Permeable Cloister,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, eds., Allyson M. Poska, Jane Couchman, Katherine A. McIver (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 13-31.

³⁵ Mark Nicholls, “Parker, William, Thirteenth Baron Morley and Fifth or First Baron Monteagle (1574/5-1622), Discoverer of the Gunpowder Plot,” in *ODNB* [<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21345>, accessed 18 Jan. 2018].

of discontent" to Frances.³⁶ Such was the extent of Elizabeth's discontent that she refused to pay her daughter's dowry, ultimately leading to Frances's withdrawal from the Brussels house.³⁷

Familial intervention in convent affairs also explains Eleanor Percy's appearance in the network. Eleanor, daughter of Henry Percy (c.1532-85), eighth earl of Northumberland, was a first cousin of Abbess Percy (their fathers were brothers).³⁸ When tensions between Percy and nuns opposed to her escalated, Eleanor intervened by writing directly to Archbishop Boonen. In her letter, which was signed and dated London, 30 November 1629, Eleanor lamented what she characterised as the disloyal and "insolent" actions of certain nuns. Emphasising her own "fine birth", she claimed that their "rebellion" against "the spiritual authority" of her cousin undermined the "noble blood" and "antiquity" of the Percy family.³⁹ Hence the affront was perceived to affect the family's standing far beyond the convent walls or diocesan boundaries. Concern to uphold his family's reputation also prompted the intervention of Henry Gage (1597-1645), a captain in Spain's Flemish army and cousin of Barbara Gage.⁴⁰ When Gage became embroiled in yet another dispute, this time with Abbess Percy, Henry intervened as he considered his cousin's treatment by the abbess and other nuns to be unfair. In a letter sent from Oudenburg to Boonen on 11 May 1638, Henry emphasised his family's "very good quality" and "esteem" among the "greatest of England" and recommended his cousin to the protection of the archbishop.⁴¹ As these letters demonstrate, despite their physical distance

³⁶ In her letter to an unknown recipient written c.1623, Ursula Hewicke referred to "letters of discontent" which Frances Parker had received from her mother: see "Ursula Hewicke [in Brussels] to [unknown], 1623", AAM, Doos 12/1. Unlike the English Augustinians at Louvain and the Sepulchrines at Liège, who allowed for circumscribed admission of the infirm, the English Benedictines made no formal provision for infirm entrants. See Claire Walker, "Recusants, Daughters and Sisters in Christ: English Nuns and their Communities in the Seventeenth Century," in *Women, Identities and Communities in Early Modern Europe*, eds, Stephanie Tarbin and Susan Broomhall (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 61-76, and Marie-Louise Coolahan, "Nuns' Writing: Translation, Textual Mobility and Transnational Networks," in Patricia Phillippy ed., *A History of Early Modern Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 274.

³⁷ For a full account of the incident involving Parker, see Walker, "Recusants, Daughters and Sisters", 71-3.

³⁸ See Carol Levin, "Percy, Henry, eighth earl of Northumberland (c.1532-1585), magnate and conspirator," in *ODNB* [<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21938>, accessed 29 Jan. 2018].

³⁹ "la rebeldia de las Monjas ... las dichas religiosas han legado a tal punto de insolencia, que no dexen de menoscabar tanto su noble nascimiento della que acotejen la media sangre de la casa de Noster con la sangre enterra de Northumberland no nos podemos mas refrenar de hazer saber a Vostra Seigneuria Illustrissima que no solamente yo que tambien soy Percy de nombre y nascimiento fino toda la casa de Northumberland la toma muy pesadamente, y no tengo ducla", "Eleanor Percy in London to [Jacobus Boonen], 30 November 1629", AAM, Doos 12/2.

⁴⁰ A.J. Loomie, "Gage, Sir Henry (1597-1645), Royalist Army Officer," in *ODNB* [<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10271>, accessed 19 Jan. 2018].

⁴¹ "tres bonne qualité, et fort bien estimé entre les plus grands d'Angleterre", "Henry Gage in Oudenbourg to [Jacobus Boonen], 11 May 1638", AAM, Doos 12/3.

from cloistered relations who were theoretically “dead to the world”, family members – even those living in England – were attuned to events within the convent. Furthermore, they were not averse to intervening when they considered their relatives unjustly treated or their family’s reputation to be at stake. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, or “disclose” reading, thus draws our attention to the ways in which early modern enclosure was compromised by the realities of dissent and threats to social status and reputation.

5 Translation as a mode of reception

Whereas ranking the network according to in-degree allows us to identify the key agitators in the convent controversy, ranking by out-degree (Figure 2) immediately brings to light the importance of translation as a mode of reception. In this visualisation the largest nodes are the people engaging with the highest number of female authors, that is, the main receivers.

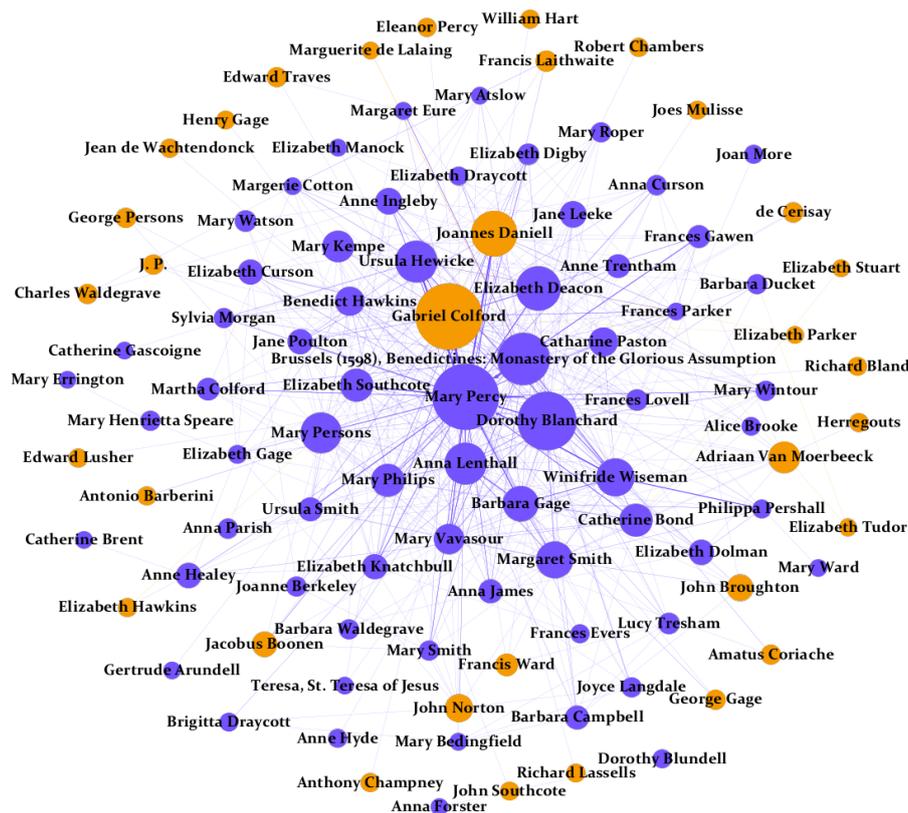


Figure 2: Brussels Benedictines Reception Network (ranked by out-degree).

Two ‘non-nun’ nodes that did not appear prominently in the previous visualisation now appear near the centre of the network. These are Gabriel Colford (d. 1628) and Joannes (or John) Daniel (*fl.* 1622). Colford was a layman originally from Essex but living in Belgium from around 1604.⁴² His daughter, Martha, entered the Brussels convent in 1609 and professed two years later in January 1611.⁴³ Following his daughter’s profession, Colford was employed as the convent’s financial manager, a position he maintained from 1611 until his death in 1628.⁴⁴ John Daniel was an English secular priest sympathetic to the Jesuit order and confessor to the Brussels nuns during the early 1620s (secular priests did not belong to a religious order). Both men were employed as translators by various members of the Brussels community. They translated letters written in English by the nuns into French and Latin so that the nuns’ letters could be understood by their Flemish male superiors. As Emilie Murphy’s research has highlighted, the nuns’ choice of translators “depended on their factional perspective”; they would employ particular translators depending on whether they belonged to the “pro-Percy” or “anti-Percy” faction.⁴⁵ In the case of Colford and Daniel, they were typically commissioned by nuns in the “anti-Percy” group, among them Elizabeth Southcote, Elizabeth Digby and Ursula Hewicke. However, when the network is filtered to identify receptions that are translations only, this immediately reveals how alliances between the nuns and their choice of translators were more complex than such binary divisions suggest.⁴⁶

The filtered translation network (Figure 3) has been ranked according to out-degree, meaning that the largest node (Daniel) is the person *translating* the highest number of individual nuns’ letters. The thickness of the edges corresponds to the number of translations. For example, Colford translated five of Ursula Hewicke’s letters; hence, the thickness of the edge linking their nodes. Similarly, Daniel translated three of Elizabeth Digby’s letters, which again is reflected in the comparatively thicker edge.

⁴² Arblaster, “The Monastery of Our Lady”, 66-7.

⁴³ WWTN (UID BB039).

⁴⁴ Murphy, “Language and Power”, 8.

⁴⁵ Murphy, “Language and Power”, 8.

⁴⁶ Murphy’s study has also revealed instances where nuns have acted as translators for other nuns.

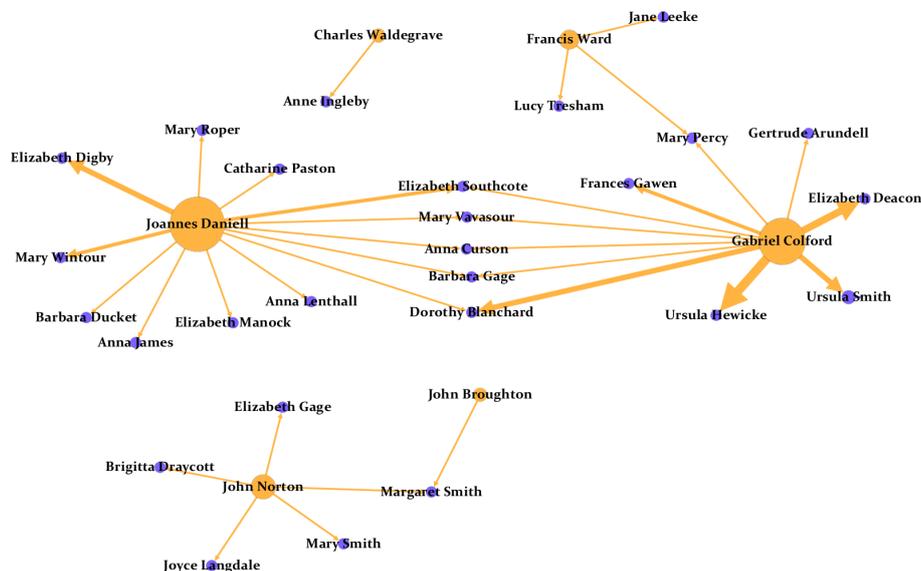


Figure 3: Filtered Translation Network with weighted edges, ranked by out-degree.

These connections reiterate the importance of Colford and Daniel as translators for nuns in the “anti-Percy” cohort since both Hewicke and Digby were identifiably part of that group. Indeed, Digby was one of the ringleaders of the “anti-Percy” group and in 1624, together with two other nuns, left the Brussels house due to ongoing disputes over the role of Jesuit confessors. With the assistance of Jesuit priests, Digby and her companions subsequently established a new Benedictine convent at Ghent, about fifty kilometres north-west of Brussels.⁴⁷ More surprising is the connection between Anna Lenthall and John Daniel since Lenthall was firmly part of the “pro-Percy” faction. In her letters to Archbishop Boonen, Lenthall defended Percy’s actions and later succeeded her as abbess of the convent following the latter’s death in 1642. Nevertheless, she actively solicited the services of Daniel to translate a letter she wrote to the archbishop on 8 April 1623 advertising her decision at the end of her letter: “I chose for [my] interperter Mr Daniell”.⁴⁸ This was the only occasion that Lenthall employed Daniel to translate her letters, however. All but two of the thirteen letters she sent to the archbishop after that date were sent directly in French

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the foundation of the Benedictine convent in Ghent, see Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century: Living Spirituality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

⁴⁸ “Translation of Anna Lenthall [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen], 8 April 1623”, AAM, Doos 12/1.

without the use of a translator, indicating her successful acquisition of that language.

When the translation filter is applied, it further nuances the network by revealing three sub-networks clustering around four external translators. These are John Norton (d.1631) and Charles Waldegrave (1592-1655), both Jesuits; John Broughton (1584-1658), a Benedictine monk; and Francis Ward (d.1665), a secular priest. These sub-networks demonstrate that the Brussels nuns were exposed to numerous potential translators from different religious orders and backgrounds. They further illustrate how the nuns' choice of translators was not always governed by factional affiliations. A case in point is the sub-network centred around John Norton (alias Knatchbull), confessor to the Brussels community during the early 1620s and a prominent Jesuit. During the early 1620s, Norton became closely associated with nuns opposed to Abbess Percy, among them his own sister, Elizabeth Knatchbull (d. 1629), who, together with the abovementioned Elizabeth Digby, left Brussels in 1624 to establish the new Ghent convent under Jesuit direction. In this venture, Knatchbull was aided by her brother who solicited patronage for the fledgling establishment and retained close connections to the rival house after its foundation, acting as the community's spiritual director.⁴⁹ Yet despite Norton's strong associations with nuns among the "anti-Percy" faction in Brussels, three of the five women he translated letters for during the early 1620s were identifiably part of the "pro-Percy" cohort: Mary Smith, Margaret Smith and Brigitta Draycott. This demonstrates that a nun's chosen translator was not always an indicator of her stance in the dispute; the need for translation services was of a separate order to factional loyalties.

6 Visualising anonymity

The visualisations discussed above have overlooked one major receiver: anonymous. Although the RECIRC project database has captured data on anonymous reception, it has not assigned unique identifiers (UIDs) to anonymous receivers. As a result, they will not appear in Gephi visualisations that trace a connection between a receiver and a female author using UIDs. A reception is designated anonymous if, for example, a letter by one of the nuns was annotated by a reader who is unidentified, either because there is no signature or the hand-writing is not recognised.⁵⁰ In the case of the Brussels correspondence, many of the letters have been underlined, suggesting

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Knatchbull was elected first abbess of the new Ghent foundation, a position she retained until her death in 1629. A biography of her life was written between 1642 and 1651 by Toby Matthew (1577-1655), her spiritual director, but remained unpublished until the twentieth century. For a discussion of this biography, see Nicky Hallett ed., "The Life of Lucy Knatchbull," in *English Convents in Exile, 1600-1800*, ed. Caroline Bowden, 6 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto 2012-13), vol. 3, 159-217, and Coolahan, "Nuns' Writing", 267-70.

⁵⁰ See for example, "Apolonia Waldegrave [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen], 2 September 1629", AAM, Doos 12/3.

engagement by a reader. But, since it is not clear whether this underlining was carried out by the person to whom the letter was addressed or another reader, "anonymous" has been selected to denote the type of receiver in such cases. Anonymous underlining amounts to 86 of the 1,188 receptions in this corpus. Entirely discounting instances of anonymous reception clearly distorts the analysis. The question of how to capture anonymity, therefore, poses a significant methodological challenge, and one that is not unique to this study.

In the broader context of early modern literary studies, debates about how best to account for anonymity in literary production and circulation have featured in a number of scholarly works. Marcy North has drawn attention to the scholarly neglect of anonymity despite the fact that more than 800 known authors were published anonymously between 1475 and 1640.⁵¹ Thanks largely to North's contribution, in recent years, scholars have begun to analyse early modern anonymity as a literary convention and "textual condition" created not only by authors but also readers (or receivers) of texts.⁵² Thus, as North has recently argued, the burgeoning field of anonymity studies has the potential to expand both the history of authorship and the study of early modern reception.⁵³ This article aims to contribute to this growing field of scholarly inquiry by experimenting with how to capture, quantify and analyse data on the ways in which English nuns' letters were received by anonymous as well as by named receivers.

Visualising anonymity presents a significant methodological challenge which, up to now, has not been adequately addressed in studies that have applied network analysis tools to early modern sources. Where anonymity has been encountered in historical sources, the trend has been to discount it entirely from datasets. For example, in their analysis of Protestant epistolary networks in Marian England, Ahnert and Ahnert excluded correspondence in which the sender or addressee was anonymous, an approach also employed by Bourke in his social network analysis of the Hartlib circle.⁵⁴ In her analysis of literary networks of Protestant disputation based on author-data extracted from polemical pamphlets published between 1548 and 1580, Aline J.E. Deicke excluded pamphlets where the author could not be identified or where author

⁵¹ Marcy L. North, *The Anonymous Renaissance: Cultures of Discretion in Tudor-Stuart England* (Chicago, Ill.; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3. See also *eadem*, "Anonymity," in *Encyclopaedia of English Renaissance Literature*, eds. Garret Sullivan and Alan Stewart, 3 vols. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), vol. 3, 8-12.

⁵² See for example, John Mullan, *Anonymity: A Secret History of English Literature* (London: Faber, 2007) and Janet W. Starnes and Barbara H. Traister, eds., *Anonymity in Early Modern England: 'What's in a Name?'* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁵³ Marcy L. North, "Early Modern Anonymity," in *Oxford Handbooks Online*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20.

⁵⁴ Ahnert and Ahnert, "Protestant Letter Networks", 5; Bourke, "Female Involvement, Membership and Centrality", 3.

attributions were considered nebulous (for example, '*vir pius*' [religious man]).⁵⁵ Since the aim of these studies was to reconstruct social networks in which social identification markers were central to understanding and analysing the network, the exclusion of anonymity was justifiable. But this study's focus on the reception of female authors and/or engagement with their writing means that account must be taken of receptions involving both named and anonymous receivers.

This network analysis has trialled two approaches to capturing anonymous receptions. The first assigns an individual UID to all instances of anonymous reception, so that "anonymous person" is represented by multiple individual nodes in the network. This had to be done manually at the data processing stage; it involved identifying all anonymous receptions in the core dataset, assigning a different UID to each and adding them to the original nodes and edges .CSV files, before importing the updated files into Gephi. As Figure 4 shows, this approach significantly expands the network. The number of nodes rises by almost 200%, from 100 when anonymous receptions are excluded, to 299, an increase of 199. The number of edges (receptions) also increases, rising from 536 to 735. Incorporating the "anonymous person" nodes thus draws our attention to the sheer quantity of anonymous receptions and establishes the importance of anonymous reception to the circulation and transmission of the nuns' correspondence.

⁵⁵ Aline J.E. Deicke, "Networks of Conflict: Analyzing the "Culture of Controversy" in Polemical Pamphlets of Intra-Protestant Disputes (1548-1580)," *Journal of Historical Network Research* 1 (2017): 79-81.

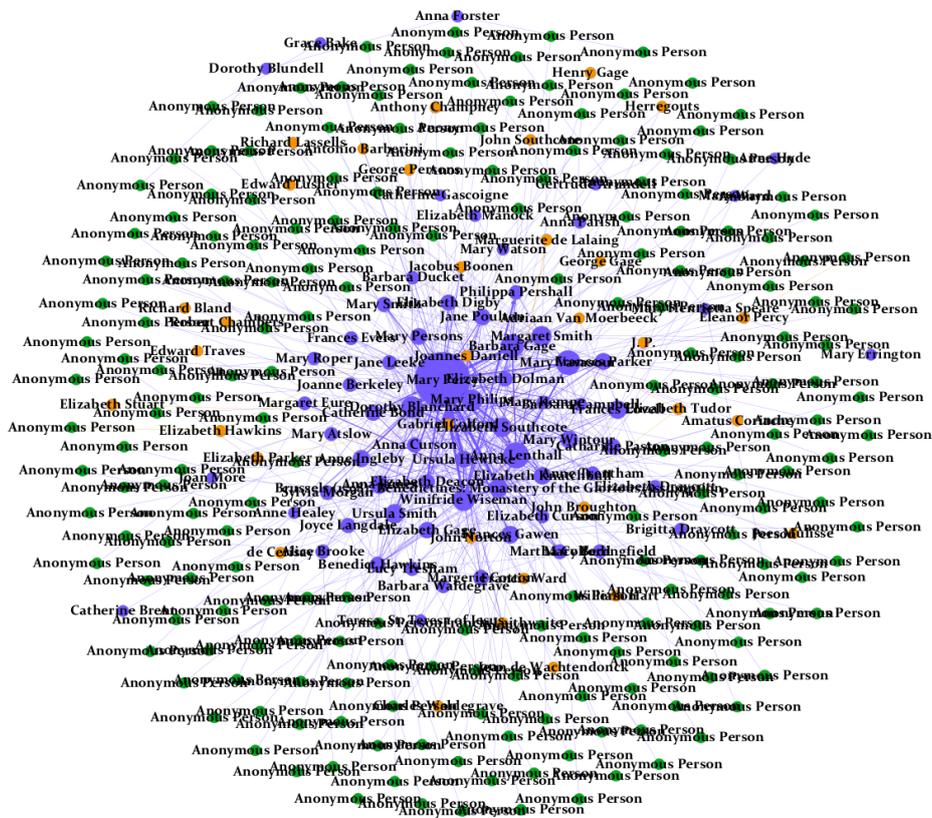


Figure 4: Brussels Benedictines Reception Network. All anonymous receptions are represented as individual “anonymous person” nodes in the network.

Despite the significant increase in the number of nodes and edges, the overall structure of the network is not impacted: Mary Percy remains the most received female author, although her in-degree (the number of people she is received by) rises significantly, from 64 to 101, an increase of 37; Gabriel Colford and Percy retain their position as the highest ranking out-degree nodes (that is, the main receivers).

There are significant drawbacks to this approach, however. The sharp rise in Percy’s in-degree is misleading since not all instances of anonymous reception were necessarily carried out by different people. This method therefore skews the results by privileging instances of anonymous reception over named reception. This is because a named receiver will only add a value of one to the in-degree of a female author’s node regardless of the quantity of receptions by that receiver; whereas each instance of anonymous reception increases the in-degree value of the female author’s node by one. Perhaps most importantly, by incorporating multiple anonymous person nodes, the network becomes less

readable, militating against the value of visualisation as a tool to aid analysis in the first place.

Approach two counteracts this diminished legibility by assigning the same UID to every instance of anonymous reception so that all anonymous receivers are represented by a single “anonymous person” node in the network (as with the case above, this had to be done manually at the data processing stage). As Figure 5 shows, incorporating “anonymous person” as a single node changes the out-degree ranking of the network. The “anonymous person” node is now the largest node, overtaking both Mary Percy and Gabriel Colford as the main receiver; it is connected to 54 different nodes (female authors) compared with Percy and Colford, who are connected to 38 each.

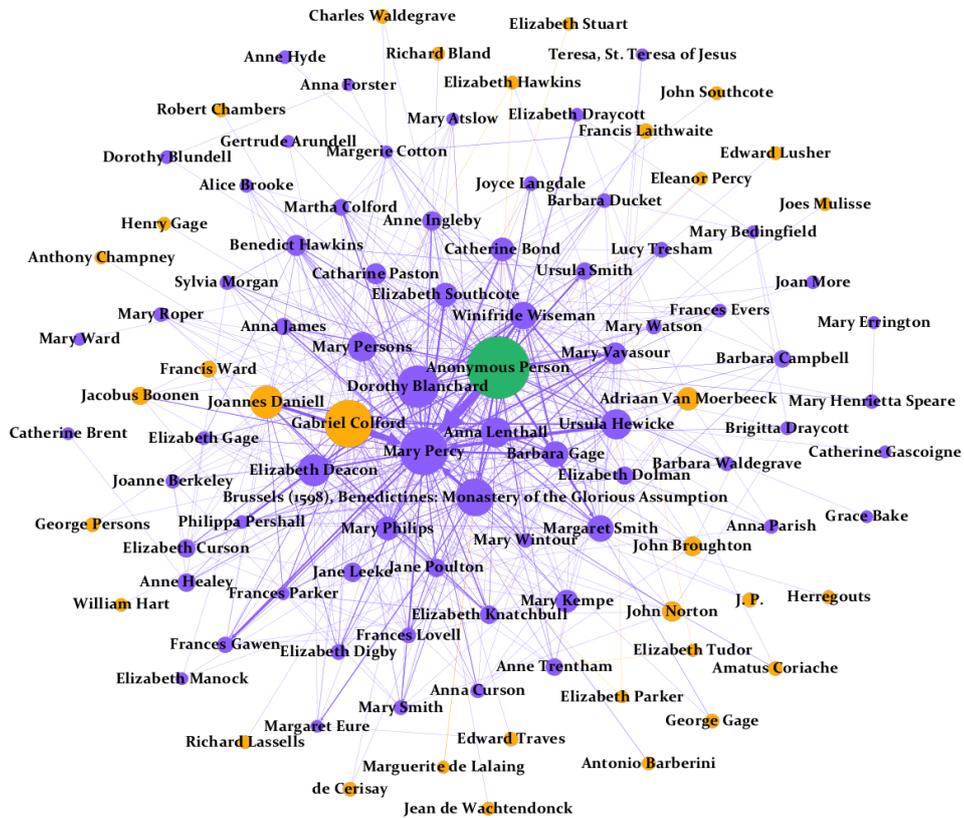


Figure 5: Brussels Benedictines Reception Network (ranked according to out-degree). All anonymous receptions are represented as a single “anonymous person” node in the network.

But the inclusion of anonymous receptions also results in the appearance of an additional female author, Grace Bake. Bake entered the Brussels convent in 1638 and remained there until her death in July 1676.⁵⁶ Just one letter written by her to Boonen survives in the archives and its anonymous reception, by a reader who underlined and annotated it, explains her appearance in this network.⁵⁷ By bringing to light hitherto hidden individuals such as Bake, the inclusion of anonymity allows for a more accurate and inclusive analysis of the Brussels' nuns' epistolary activity and the reception of their letters beyond the convent walls. Again, this approach is not without limitations. Most obviously, it distorts the results by creating the impression that all instances of anonymous reception were carried out by the same person when, in fact, we cannot know whether the same anonymous person annotated just one letter or was responsible for multiple annotations on multiple letters. Thus, neither approach satisfactorily resolves the conundrum of anonymity but both highlight its importance to the circulation of the nuns' epistles.

7 Conclusion

In the last decade, the study of early modern English convents in exile has become a buoyant field of scholarly enquiry, driven in no small part by improved accessibility – both online and in print – to archival sources relating to these exiled institutions. As accessibility increases, scholars are deploying innovative tools and methodologies that can facilitate new revelations about the convents and their role in the wider post-Reformation history and culture of English and European Catholicism. Using a corpus of 405 letters produced by and about members of the English Benedictine convent in Brussels, this article has demonstrated the applicability of quantitative network analysis and visualisation methods to early modern convent sources and presented the insights that can be gleaned as a result. As this study has illustrated, however, quantitative network analysis methods are most valuable when combined with qualitative research and close reading of the primary sources. This combination opens up new ways of understanding the disputes that engulfed the English Benedictine convent during the 1620s and 1630s. What emerges confirms the centrality of key office holders but also throws up an outlier, whose centrality is not as evident using established qualitative methods. Significantly, the visualisations produced here graphically illustrate the breadth and extent of the nuns' epistolary relationships. In so doing, they progress debates about the role of enclosure in early modern convents and highlight how, despite geographical distance, family members were attuned to events within the convent cloister. The application of the translation filter nuances our understanding of the network and how it operated, bringing to light the importance of translation to the transmission of the nuns' letters. Finally, this study has sought to advance

⁵⁶ WWTN (UID BB008).

⁵⁷ "Grace Bake [in Brussels] to [Jacobus Boonen] [15 January 1639]", AAM, Doos 12/3.

discussion about the methodological challenges posed by anonymity, demonstrating how important it was to the reception and circulation of the nuns' correspondence and how challenging it is to account for using quantitative methods.

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