

The Antiquarian and the Abbess: Gender, Genre, and the Reception of Early Modern Historical Writing

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In a 2007 essay on early modern women and literary form, the late Sasha Roberts posed a question at once prescient and provocative: “[C]an formalist literary analysis be reconciled with feminist literary criticism?”¹ Scholars of early modern women’s literature have recently begun to grapple with this query in earnest, analyzing how women’s writing was shaped by the intersection of form, gender, and historical circumstance.² Yet as Jenna Lay has observed, the emphasis on poetry in this nascent subfield unnecessarily limits our understanding of form: “a narrow focus on poetry would obscure the fact that Catholic women’s formal experimentation in a variety of genres offered sites for engagement in broader religious, political, and literary networks.”³ Early modern women writers of all confessional stripes frequently composed in prose, most notably diaries, mother’s legacies, and spiritual meditations. Since many of these noncanonical genres lack previous formal analysis, it is time for scholars to begin determining their defining features. As Roberts contended in another pioneering essay from 2007, “women’s literary capital in early modern England was predicated upon their command of literary form.”⁴ If we are to arrive at the fullest possible understanding of women’s formal choices, we must identify the kinds of literary capital associated with their reception of prose forms.

This essay offers a first step toward mapping this terrain by considering how two Benedictine writers, Claude Estienne de la Serrée (1639–1699) and Anne (Mary) Neville (1605–1689), engaged with the generic conventions of historical writing, specifically the subgenre of monastic history. In doing so, it bridges a serious rift in scholarship on early modern historiography. Commenting on the previous neglect of women’s engagement with form, Roberts cautions that the aims of formalism and feminism may be

irreconcilable: “a feminist criticism that takes gender to be a central category of analysis and a formalist criticism that does *not* will remain . . . exquisitely incompatible.”⁵ Critical conversations about early modern historical writing in England have developed along separate, largely gendered tracks. On the one hand, scholarly attention to formal changes in historical writing has revealed that a profound shift occurred in the early modern era as male historians abandoned the medieval chronicle and embraced historical writing based on antiquarianism, laying the groundwork for modern forms of history.⁶ On the other hand, early feminist scholars established that women preferred the historical subgenre of life writing.⁷ More recently, feminist scholars have responded to the lack of women’s formal historical writing by arguing that we must rethink the nature of the genre itself.⁸ Scholarship on early modern historiography has a teleological basis that derives from narratives that emerged during the seventeenth century. As Megan Matchinske comments, in this period “[t]he majority of history’s new rule makers were men—educated men with the contacts and skill sets to match. Formalized history, history as the discipline that it was on its way to becoming, had little room for inexperienced or poorly trained female practitioners.”⁹ When read from the forward-looking perspective of what history became, the alternative tradition of female historiography—however powerfully articulated—is merely a literary cul-de-sac.

One corpus of texts spans these apparently separate historical traditions: monastic histories, which may be divided into annals, chronicles, and life writing. Annals and chronicles have long been dismissed by critics as genres belonging to the medieval past rather than the incipient modernism of the Renaissance.¹⁰ Within an English context, this marginalization of monastic history has been further encouraged by a Whiggish tendency to view the Catholic past as retreating before an enlightened Protestantism.¹¹ Graham Parry, for example, has asserted that “[m]onastic history did not exist before the seventeenth century, and was an invention of the antiquarians.”¹² This statement, which reflects modern conceptions of what history is, does not square with the assessments of seventeenth-century scholars. The Protestant antiquarian John Marsham noted in 1661 that “[w]ithout monks, we would indeed be always boys in the history of our fatherland.”¹³ Thirty years later, the great Maurist historian Jean Mabillon paraphrased Marsham with evident relish: “It has been said by a clever English Protestant that without the help of monks, we would know nothing of English history.”¹⁴ Mabillon, like other monks and nuns of his era, continued the medieval tradition of writing monastic history.¹⁵ In fact, the Maurists sought to introduce a

newfound rigor into the chronicle by employing humanist principles, and Mabillon's own establishment of the scholarly fields of palaeography and diplomatics considerably advanced the study of history.¹⁶

Annals and chronicles were one of the most important genres of writing in the convents for Englishwomen established on the Continent during the seventeenth century, yet these works have received little critical attention. With a recent wave of scholarly editions of these texts, it is time for sustained formal analysis of this genre.¹⁷ The feminist formalism advocated by Elizabeth Scott-Baumann offers a natural starting point for considering how English nuns received English and European historical traditions.¹⁸ Combining feminism, historical formalism, and histories of reading, this approach highlights the centrality of reception to early modern literary culture by focusing on how female authors reworked particular genres. Reading Estiennot and Neville through the lens of feminist formalism, this article attempts to complicate critical narratives about early modern history. A Maurist and antiquarian, Estiennot wrote a chronicle of the Congregation of the English Benedictine Dames that exemplifies the professional revolution in historiography. Neville, in contrast, cultivated the humbler position of an abbess, creating a historical sketch of her congregation that served as both a familial history and a personal *aide-mémoire*. By considering the different ways that Estiennot and Neville approached the same historical subject, this article demonstrates that reading prose in terms of its formal qualities can provide new insights into the interrelationship of gender and genre in the early modern period, especially the ways that gender influenced women's reception of particular genres.

Estiennot and Neville: Contexts and texts

The Congregation of the English Benedictine Dames consisted of five convents that followed the same constitutions and were known for their devotion to Ignatian spirituality: Brussels (1598), Ghent (1624), Boulogne (1652; relocated to Pontoise in 1658), Dunkirk (1662), and Ypres (1665).¹⁹ Not only was the congregation the largest federation of English convents on the Continent, but it also generated the only surviving comparative histories (or histories of multiple monasteries) about these institutions. The accounts of Estiennot and Neville emerged from the local monastic network of the Pontoise convent, particularly its close working relationship with the Maurist monks of Saint Martin in Pontoise. The Boulogne foundation was translated to Pontoise in 1658 after the nuns found its original location unsuitable

due to an inclement seaside climate and military garrisons. When the convent's original plan to resettle in Paris proved impossible, Walter Montagu—commendatory abbot of Saint Martin and royal almoner to Henrietta Maria—promised to aid the nuns if they moved to Pontoise. The community bought property within a kilometer of Saint Martin and remained there until their convent's suppression in 1786. Even after Montagu's death in 1677, the English nuns interacted frequently with Saint Martin. Montagu had been their superior, and the Cardinal de Bouillon took on this role when he became commendatory abbot of Saint Martin. The comparative histories of Estiennot and Neville attest to the many ways that the convent benefited from the monks' patronage, in this case by gaining access to the cutting-edge historical scholarship associated with the Maurists.

Established between 1618 and 1621, the Maurists developed a reputation for antiquarian research due to the efforts of leading members such as Luc d'Achery (1609–1685), librarian at Saint-Germain-des-Prés. In May 1648, for example, d'Achery wrote to Bernard Audebert, the president of the congregation, and to the definitors of the congregation with a proposal that the congregation produce two histories: “for the splendor and honor of the Order and the Congregation, it is opportune to work on a general history . . . and in particular one of the Congregation.”²⁰ This congregation-wide effort would result in two seminal publications overseen by Mabillon, one on Benedictine history (*Annales Ordinis Sancti Benedicti*, 1703–7) and one on Benedictine hagiography (*Acta Ordinis Sancti Benedicti*, 1668–1701). Estiennot played an important role in this scholarly program, although today he is chiefly remembered as a close friend of Mabillon.²¹ After taking his vows in 1658, Estiennot became a teacher and director at a college in Pontlevoy. He chafed at its focus on secular learning and petitioned d'Achery for a new assignment, which led to his transfer to Saint-Germain-des-Prés in 1669 and his friendship with Mabillon. By July 1670, Estiennot had arrived in Pontoise as the subprior of Saint Martin, where he composed histories of three local monastic institutions: three volumes on Saint Martin (1670–72), two volumes on the Cistercians of Maubuisson Abbey (July 1, 1671), and one volume on the Congregation of the English Benedictine Dames (June 22, 1672).²² Between 1672 and 1684, Estiennot aided Mabillon's scholarly agenda by conducting antiquarian research at monasteries in southern France. During this period, he gathered an impressive amount of historical research that he organized into volumes for the use of Mabillon and the Maurists more generally: four monastic histories, fourteen volumes of collections on Aquitaine (1684), and twenty-five volumes of historical compilations covering

eighteen dioceses. In 1684, Estiennot became the procurator general for the Maurists and was sent to Rome, where he died in 1699.

Estiennot's twofold career as an antiquarian and a historian exemplifies the scholarly methodologies and output of the Maurists. His many compilations became the raw material for the *Annales* as well as Mabillon's landmark volume on diplomatics (*De re diplomatica*, 1681).²³ Although scholars have paid little attention to Estiennot's monastic histories, leading Maurists saw these works as essential contributions to the congregation's scholarly endeavors. On November 11, 1670, d'Achery sent a letter to Estiennot with the explicit purpose of encouraging him to complete his history of Saint Martin, then underway:

It is very pleasing for me to hear, my dearest Father, that you diligently perform labor and expend your zeal in digging up older documents, which are wrangled over by moths and bookworms, and in illuminating the monuments—covered with dust—which remain of Saint Martin at Pontoise, so that thence you may complete a history. All learned men deem that kind of writing best, since it concerns not only historical matters, but those which pertain to rightly establishing morals, to expounding the Holy Scripture, and to bringing forth the Catholic faith.²⁴

As d'Achery's praise indicates, this project fulfilled the Maurist vision of history through its focus on the Benedictines, its basis in antiquarian research, and its moral utility. By this point, Estiennot was already contemplating a similar history of Maubuisson Abbey, as he mentioned in a letter to Claude Martin, the superior general, on October 26, 1670: "I am seriously applying myself . . . to our little history and I am presently to the year 1500 in it. . . . The Reverend Father Dom Jean Mabillon writes me that Your Reverence does not find it evil that I should undertake the history of Maubuisson. I will do it willingly if Madame [Abbess Louise Hollandine] wishes to send me the charters of which I have need."²⁵ While Maubuisson was a Cistercian foundation, this proposed history once again fit within the larger Maurist program, which involved chronicling all orders that traced their origins back to Saint Benedict.²⁶ His history of the Brussels congregation likely received a similar level of institutional support from the Congregation of Saint Maur as Estiennot traveled to Brussels and Ghent.²⁷

The resulting history, *Histoire des Monasteres de la Congregation des Dames Benedictines Angloises*, exists in two versions: one from Pontoise

(Box T IV 2, Douai Abbey) and one from Brussels (Haslemere 1800 VI C, Downside Abbey). Both manuscripts are fair copies, and each has been annotated in purple ink by Mary Thais English, a nineteenth-century monastic historian from Teignmouth Abbey. Dating from June 22, 1672, the Pontoise manuscript is a presentation copy prepared for Neville in a mixed secretary hand that may be Estiennot's holograph. The title page features a large lozenge with the title in the middle, bordered by elaborate decorations with Christian symbolism: doves, grapes, vines, and a peacock. The dedicatory preface is topped by Neville's coat of arms superimposed on an abbatial crozier and flanked by birds in lozenges made of vines bearing grapes. Four hundred and twelve pages in length, the Pontoise manuscript falls into three major sections: (1) ten chapters offering a chronological history of the five convents in the congregation; (2) a chapter listing the congregation's benefactors; (3) a chapter containing a register of the congregation's past and present members. Most chapters conclude with blank pages so that later nuns could update the manuscript. Although Neville did not continue the *Histoire*, she read Estiennot's work attentively and made numerous emendations and insertions.

The Brussels copy can be roughly dated to June 1673 since Neville has added profession dates for six Pontoise nuns who professed between August 18, 1672 and June 16, 1673.²⁸ This timing seems linked to the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Brussels convent's foundation in November 1598. Whether Neville arranged for transcriptions to be sent to every house in the congregation or simply to Brussels, this copy probably served as a gift honoring the Brussels convent's role as the original motherhouse of a flourishing congregation. The scribe, who used an italic hand and may have been a nun, worked directly from the Pontoise manuscript and silently incorporated Neville's changes to the text. A series of variant passages reveals Neville's keen awareness that Estiennot's work could prove controversial. For example, the Pontoise manuscript erroneously claims that Mary Percy decided to found the Ghent filiation. In that copy, this material has been carefully boxed in with lines, probably by Neville. These sentences are replaced in the Brussels manuscript with a shorter passage stating, correctly, that the Ghent venture was proposed by outside friends of the nuns.²⁹ Elsewhere, a sentence about monies lost to the Dunkirk foundation has been omitted, presumably because it might seem anti-Bourbon: "the fund of 20,000 pounds which ought to have served for this new foundation was assigned to the domain of Dunkirk, which being sold to the most Christian king [Louis XIV] some months after our establishment, we were unable to touch the interest."³⁰ In

the Pontoise manuscript, this material has been marked with an “x” at its start and end, again likely by Neville. Another eliminated passage describes the noncanonical election of Marina Beaumont as abbess at Ypres. As Mary Thais English observes in a marginal note within the Pontoise copy, this material was “prudently suppressed—the parties being all still living.”³¹ The two copies of Estiennot’s *Histoire* thus offer tantalizing glimpses of the different historical priorities of the antiquarian and the abbess.

Neville’s protective attitude toward the congregation was no doubt shaped by her experiences in four of its convents. Baptized in 1605 as Mary, she was one of four children born to Henry Nevill, 9th Lord Abergavenny, and his wife Mary Sackville.³² In his description of how Abbess Alexia Blanchard of Brussels was brought up in this household, Estiennot depicts an environment of pious learning: “Lady Alexia Blanchard . . . gave herself to Lady Mary Nevill and she received at the house of this Lady of quality all the good education that one could have in a great house, and a house of piety as was that of Lady Nevill.”³³ Neville probably first joined Blanchard at Brussels, but must have left for Ghent after the former convent began to quarrel over the role of Jesuit priests during the early 1630s.³⁴ After professing at Ghent in 1634 and taking Anne as her name in religion, Neville taught the house’s pensioners and served in a series of important monastic offices: procuratrix (financial officer, 1641), mistress of novices (1645, 1648–49, 1660), consultrix (counselor to the abbess, 1650), dean (enforcer of monastic order, 1650), and prioress (1654).³⁵ In 1662, Abbess Mary Knatchbull sent Neville to help begin the Dunkirk filiation before dispatching her to England. Neville remained there for the next four years to receive a pension from Charles II for the Ghent community.³⁶ During this time, she renewed a warm friendship with Abbess Eugenia Thorold of Pontoise, who had professed at Ghent five years after her. When Charles ceased to pay Ghent’s pension in 1667, Neville returned to Ghent. The fledgling communities at Dunkirk and Pontoise both petitioned Knatchbull to send her to them. Neville chose to join Thorold at Pontoise, where she served as abbess from 1667 to 1689.

While Estiennot’s antiquarianism was fundamental to his identity as a Maurist, for Neville scholarship took second place to her administrative duties. In fact, all of Neville’s surviving writings can be linked to her monastic offices. The earliest example appears in a Dunkirk manuscript that originally belonged to the schoolhouse for postulants and novices at Ghent. Neville added a table of contents and a two-page instruction entitled “Be mindfull of 3 things,” which encourages exterior obedience, interior

humility, and diligence in devotion.³⁷ Neville also composed a number of other texts, largely during her stint as abbess of Pontoise: a chronicle of the congregation's beginnings (ca. 1672, now lost), a memoir of the Ghent and Dunkirk houses (ca. 1663, now lost), a treatise on monastic guidance (1676), a book of registers (1680), and the Pontoise annals (ca. 1672–89, now lost). Displaying an interest in antiquarianism herself, Neville was aware of the value of preserving historical information for future generations. In 1680, she wrote a brief preface to the book of registers that explains her decision to include material already written down elsewhere: “beeing thus duplicated & kept by severall persons, they will not so easily be destroyed; and . . . some that may succeed us will be glad to find things put unto a Methode for them.”³⁸ Through various kinds of administrative writing, Neville practiced a utilitarian form of writing that was partly driven by antiquarian ideals.

Neville also participated in two larger historical projects that moved beyond this administrative framework. A particularly intriguing reference to her historical scholarship appears in Edward Scarisbriek's preface to *The Life of the Lady Warner of Parham* (1691), a Poor Clare at Gravelines:

the Originals I have made use of in compiling the Actions of this holy persons Life, have by the importunity and Authority of the Honorable Lady *Anne Nevil* of happy Memory, late Abbess of *Pontoise*, been rather extorted from the Monastery [*sic*] of *Graveling* than freely offer'd; so that I am beholden to my Ladies Zeal for the greatest part of the Memoires which she had industriously got together, with design to have put them into such a Method as might fit them for the Press.³⁹

Teresa Clare of Jesus (Trevor) Warner (1636–1670) was married to Sir John Warner (ca. 1640–1705), who took the alias Father Clare after becoming an English Jesuit. He was an important patron of the Pontoise Benedictines, and Neville paid him an elaborate compliment by aiming to write a life of his spouse. More importantly, Scarisbriek offers a glimpse into Neville's historical methodology. Following antiquarian principles much like Estiennot, Neville sought out “original” documents from the Gravelines house. Her history of her congregation is similarly based on eyewitness testimony gathered through correspondence. In letters dated July 4, 1672 and July 18, 1672, Abbess Mary Vavasour of the Brussels Benedictines responded to Neville's request for help with a “cronicle” by sending first-person accounts of the convent's history.⁴⁰ While most English nuns chose to write histories of

their own institutions, Neville took a broader view of the history of English Catholicism by embarking on histories of a nun from another order and convents outside of her own cloister.

Neville's historical account of the congregation is extant as a single holograph manuscript of 317 pages, entitled *The beginning of the Congregation of the english Benedictin Dames dedicated to our Blessed Ladys all Glorious Assumption; at Brusselles; and since extended, into severall other howses of the same Rule & constitutions, all of them dedicated to the Honnor of our Blessed lady under some title or mistery appertayning to the Queene of heaven; who hath ever shewed her selfe, a loving Mother and favourable protrectrice to them.*⁴¹ Written primarily for her own purposes, the text shows no signs of having been circulated outside of the Pontoise house. In the final entry, Neville notes that "I made this litle compendium more for my owne helpe of memor[y] and knowing wher to find perticulers as occation might require, than for any other desighn [*sic*]."⁴² The personal rather than administrative function of this work is further revealed by its binding. Unusually lavish for a monastic context, the book's covers are gilded, hand-tooled, and decoratively painted. The back cover features the name of Neville's father ("Henry Aburguevenny") in gilding while the similarly elaborate front cover supplies what is likely his motto ("Wrath and hastynesse ar very evyl counsellours"). In addition to serving as a personal commemoration of her father, this binding linked Neville's biological family with her spiritual family. The text itself contains much more than just a history of the congregation's earliest days. Neville chronicles the origins of the congregation's five houses, broken into four sections: the history of the Brussels house, 1597 to 1685; the history of the Ghent house, 1624 to 1665; the history of the Ypres house, 1665 to 1686; and the history of the Pontoise house, 1652 to 1687. Neville covers the foundation of the Dunkirk convent in the chapter on Ghent. Like Estiennot, Neville divides her manuscript into sections by institution, and she also leaves blank pages at the end of each section for future updates. Evidence indicates that Neville did continue to add new information over the years. The earliest material on Brussels dates from 1672, "when I began our chronicle," but a later entry cites a letter sent to her in 1685 upon the death of her friend Mary Bedingfield.⁴³ At once institutional and personal, Neville's compendium borrows Estiennot's format of comparative monastic history for her own purposes.

Feminist formalism and monastic history

The varying agendas of the antiquarian and the abbess come clearly into focus when these texts are viewed through the lens of feminist formalism. Scholars have long sought to differentiate between the annal, the chronicle, and the history.⁴⁴ The three genres are interconnected to some degree, as an evocative metaphor by William Stubbs suggests: “The annals are the ore, the chronicles are the purified metal out of which the historian elaborates his perfect jewel.”⁴⁵ Stubbs observes more precisely that “The difference between chronicles and annals was . . . that the former have a continuity of subject and style, whilst the latter contain the mere jottings down of unconnected events.”⁴⁶ In addition to continuity, chronicles differ in format from annals, as K. J. P. Lowe notes: “Annals proceeded from year to year whereas chronicles proceeded in a roughly chronological fashion.”⁴⁷ The chronicle may in turn be distinguished from the history by the latter’s focus on analyzing the causes and ramifications of events. Both Estiennot’s *Histoire* and Neville’s *Beginning* are chronicles, or chronological narratives drawn from the “ore” of annals and primary documents. Yet obvious differences in the authors’ approaches raise important questions about how gender shaped reception and, in turn, decisions about composition. An analysis of their handling of evidence, historical methodology, and construction of authorship reveals that a twofold set of intertwined identities—gender and monastic vocation— informed how Estiennot and Neville received and wrote history.

As a member of the Maurists and a friend of Mabillon, Estiennot belonged to an influential circle of male historians who were at the forefront of historical research. Estiennot himself describes the *Histoire* as a compilation, or an antiquarian resource for those who would write the history of the congregation in future years: “This work is only an assemblage of memoirs which will someday serve those who will work on the history of a congregation that being so illustrious in its birth cannot but be highly so in its progress.”⁴⁸ Estiennot incorporates anonymous convent writings frequently within the text, creating narrative dissonance as he shifts from the third-person voice that characterizes his role as a narrator into a first-person perspective that conveys the nuns’ viewpoint. One especially jarring transition occurs in his discussion of Ghent: “Lady Mary Roper was elected abbess . . . and governed *her* monastery for five years very sagely and with much edification. The King of Great Britain [Charles II] having been received magnificently in the city of Ghent, came to see *our* community, and was so edified by the modesty of *our* religious.”⁴⁹ The *Histoire* thus has a patchwork qual-

ity reminiscent of medieval chroniclers who stitched together material from various sources with little historical analysis.

Yet at the same time, Estiennot conforms to the theories of historiography advanced by the Maurists. These ideas are perhaps best articulated in Mabillon's 1677 defense of Maurist practices, which lays out two major principles of historiography: "the love and pursuit of truth in past things" and "the frankness to speak and write out of good faith, as he believes it."⁵⁰ Authoritative sources offer the surest means of establishing historical truth, and Estiennot's *Histoire* features genealogical and heraldic information for abbesses as well as male-authored texts that trace the administrative history of the congregation.⁵¹ While discussing the Brussels Benedictines, for example, Estiennot provides complete French translations of Pope Clement VIII's brief permitting the house's establishment, Archbishop Mathias Hovius's approval of its statutes, and the Congregation of Regulars' 1636 decision rejecting the convent's request to leave the local archbishop's jurisdiction. By prominently flagging the authorship of texts by men while silently incorporating nuns' writings, Estiennot creates a gendered dynamic in which historical authority is largely male. Estiennot also displays the quality of frankness by including material that might prove embarrassing for the congregation, as previously noted. Mabillon himself observed that even bad examples can serve moral ends: readers of history will "find in the saints and in vertuous persons what is edifying, and in the wicked and immoral what one must avoid."⁵² Estiennot's *Histoire* thus provided Neville with a Maurist model of historical writing that was based on state-of-the-art antiquarianism.

Yet Neville chose to write a very different kind of history, creating a historical compendium rather than a chronicle. Her classification system for manuscripts offers the first hint of this generic difference. The flyleaf of her treatise on monastic guidance is marked "AB" for its use by the abbess, while her book of registers is labeled "CH" for its relevance to the chantress who remembered obligations to the dead.⁵³ Neville has written "CR" for "chronicle" on the front flyleaf to the Pontoise copy of Estiennot, and repeatedly refers to the *Histoire* as "our French chronicle" in her own account.⁵⁴ Both material and internal evidence reveal that Neville did not see herself as engaged in writing a chronicle of her own. The front pastedown to Neville's account bears this note: "CO The 2nd of this marke." "CO" refers to "compendium," a term that—along with its synonyms—Neville frequently uses within the text itself. For example, Neville distinguishes between chronicles and compendia as she glosses over the many scandalous quarrels at Brussels: "as this is no chronicle, but a litle abstract and compendium of the

most noted years and accidents, I must ommit many things which may be better elswher enlargd, this only serving to retayn this out of the blank of oblivion.”⁵⁵ In contrast with the fuller treatment expected of a chronicle, Neville only supplies “An epitome, a summary, a brief.”⁵⁶ Elsewhere, she calls her work “this litle abrigment,” another synonym for compendium.⁵⁷ To return to a previously cited passage, her decision to preserve only the most important moments of the congregation’s history from “the blank of oblivion” is both antiquarian and personal: “This abreviated observance is much more at large set down and in better proportions but because all thos things ar hazardous to decay and lose I made this litle compendium more for my owne helpe of memor[y] and knowing wher to find perticulers as occa-tion might require, than for any other desighn.”⁵⁸ Neville’s compendium thus emerged from her administrative role as an abbess who felt the need to safeguard communal memory by shoring up her own.

Much like Estiennot, Neville’s compendium is an assemblage of material from multiple sources. The text begins by citing material from “our chronicle,” presumably a historical account that Neville wrote of the congregation’s beginnings as signaled by the title of her compendium.⁵⁹ The account of Brussels’s history does read much like a chronicle, providing a retrospective viewpoint on the convent’s foundation that reflects its primary sources: Vavasour’s letters and Estiennot’s *Histoire*. When the narrative turns to the foundations of Ghent and Dunkirk, external sources fall away altogether and the text takes on an autobiographical cast as Neville draws on memoirs composed during her stay in England. For example, she notes that an event from 1662 occurred on the “6th of May last.”⁶⁰ The final section on Pontoise is especially heterogeneous. In addition to citing annals from the community’s time in Boulogne, Neville also incorporates financial and spiritual accounts that she gave to Montague during his visitations.⁶¹ The text concludes with material drawn from “our Annals,” which Neville maintained in her capacity as abbess.⁶² Organized year by year, this section is annalistic, diaristic, and apparently contemporary with the events described: “This day was a sad on[e] to us by the vyolence of the river breaking in and casting down our walls.”⁶³ The text breaks off with a semicolon in 1687, two years before Neville’s death. Unfinished and heterogeneous, administrative and personal, Neville’s compendium does not seek to replicate the Maurist principles of Estiennot’s *Histoire* but rather fulfills its author’s own idiosyncratic aims.

Neville’s handling of sources provides an excellent opportunity for considering whether gender influenced the differences between these texts.

Although Lowe argues strongly for an anti-essentialist view of women's historical writing, she concedes that Italian nuns' use of source material demonstrates some gendered characteristics: "Published and unpublished narrative histories of various sorts, classical writers, and biblical stories seem to have counted for considerably less than documentary material in the convent archives and oral testimony from older nuns."⁶⁴ The histories of Estiennot and Neville illustrate this tendency quite clearly. While Neville, like Estiennot, uses intertextuality to establish the credibility of her account of the Brussels house, she shows little interest in official ecclesiastical documents. Neville refers only in passing to Clement's brief and Hovius's approbation, and she cites an abbreviated version of the letter from the Congregation of Regulars. Instead, Neville relies on the personal testimonies of other nuns and explicitly observes that her own authority as historian depends on Vavasour:

I thought it necessary to make known from what hand I had my information to render it the more acceptable to thos that may peruse this litle abridgment of our Congregation: and as certaynly this worthy Abbess was a person of great vertu and integrity, and knew all passages and persons from the beginning, her words can not but carry full authority with them in all respects.⁶⁵

Neville does not expect to have "authority" in her own right, but rather evokes Vavasour's reputation in order to make her work "more acceptable" to readers. She also frequently attributes quotations to Vavasour through marginal notes, visually signaling her importance to the reader. Every bit as scrupulous as Estiennot about working with authentic sources, Neville operates within the context of local history rather than the grand narratives of Maurist historiography. Her history of the congregation is thus written from a familial perspective that favors the voices of its members, especially abbesses, over official documents from its male superiors.

The comparative histories of Estiennot and Neville also diverge in another crucial respect that strikingly demonstrates how "literary forms . . . encode gender": the author function.⁶⁶ Participating in the emergence of formalized history, Estiennot presents himself as an objective historian who records official facts for future scholars according to the Maurist tenets of truth and frankness. By prioritizing official clerical voices as authoritative witnesses to the history of the congregation, Estiennot constructs an author function that reflects both his chosen genre of formalized history

and his twofold identities as a Maurist and a member of the church's patriarchal order. Neville, by contrast, fashions the modest authorial persona of the amateur historian, in keeping with the Benedictine order's emphasis on humility. As we have already seen, Neville cedes her authority as a historian to figures such as Vavasour. Of course, Neville herself was a major figure in the history of her congregation, but she undercuts her importance. In depicting her own election as abbess, Neville emphasizes her reluctance to chronicle her own story: "And I the most unworthy was chosen, though I blush and hold this and severall other things of this nature improper for me to wright. But having begun our Annals and finding yet non of ours willing to ingage intirly in it, I am constraynd to take this mortification upon my selfe."⁶⁷ Viewing writing as a form of "mortification," Neville constructs herself as an unwilling historian in contrast with Estiennot's antiquarian persona. Such hesitancy belies her clear interest in historical writing, whether of her own houses (via the compendium, her memoirs, and the Pontoise annals) or of English Catholicism (the projected biography of Warner). Appropriately for a form of history that continues the medieval chronicle's focus on pious moralization, a gendered and monastic author function emerges: a Benedictine abbess who is defined by her modesty. While Neville could have used Estiennot's *Histoire* as a basis for writing her own formalized history of the congregation, her choice to write a compendium instead reveals a perceived need to modify antiquarianism so that it better fit with her own vision of her role as a Benedictine abbess. Neville's humility thus paradoxically reveals her self-assurance as a historian who feels free to appropriate antiquarian methods for her own purposes.

As this essay has attempted to demonstrate, reading early modern women's prose via feminist formalism offers new possibilities for advancing our understanding of the ways that gender influenced the reception of genre and how that played into formal decisions about genre and composition in the early modern period. We can better understand differences between the accounts of Estiennot and Neville by viewing early modern monastic history as a form rooted in particular gendered, historical, and social contexts. Estiennot and Neville adapted this genre in order to fit their respective monastic identities as a Maurist antiquarian and a Benedictine abbess. If Neville opted not to write a formal history in line with Maurist standards, that was not due to a lack of education, models, or sources but rather to her perception of what genre best benefited herself and her house. Danielle Clarke and

Marie-Louise Coolahan have hypothesized that “the evasion of form in the case of women’s writing is perhaps due to a critical tendency not to take decisions about form seriously *as choices*.”⁶⁸ When we take Neville’s formal choices seriously, her compendium can be read as the result of an informed decision about what kind of historical writing suited her needs. By applying feminist formalism to prose, we can thus recover new evidence of women’s formal innovations. Furthermore, the wide range of Neville’s historical writings as preserved in her various works (annals, chronicle, compendium, and memoirs) reveals the vitality of monastic history more broadly. Estiennot and Neville viewed historiography as a malleable genre with historic significance and future relevance, not a retrograde or moribund form. Reading these monastic histories through the lens of feminist formalism offers an antidote to the teleological master narrative of historiography while also suggesting the value of approaching early modern women’s prose in terms of genre.



Notes

- 1 Sasha Roberts, “Feminist Criticism and the New Formalism: Early Modern Women and Literary Engagement,” in *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*, ed. Dymna Callaghan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 67–92, at 67.
- 2 Sasha Roberts, “Women’s Literary Capital in Early Modern England: Formal Composition and Rhetorical Display in Manuscript and Print,” *Women’s Writing* 14, no. 2 (2007): 246–69; Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, *Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetry, and Culture, 1640–1680* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Danielle Clarke and Marie-Louise Coolahan, “Gender, Reception, and Form: Early Modern Women and the Making of Verse,” in *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 144–61.
- 3 Jenna Lay, *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3.
- 4 Roberts, “Women’s Literary Capital,” 247.
- 5 Roberts, “Feminist Criticism,” 69, her emphasis.
- 6 F. Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought, 1580–1640* (London: Routledge, 1962); Angus Vine, *In Defiance of Time: Antiquarian Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 7 D. R. Woolf, “A Feminine Past? Gender, Genre, and Historical Knowledge in England, 1500–1800,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 4 (1997): 645–79; Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 249–56; Isobel Grundy, “Wom-

- en's History? Writings by English Nuns," in *Women, Writing, History, 1640–1740*, ed. Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (London: B. T. Batsford, 1992), 126–38; Natalie Zemon Davis, "Gender and Genre: Women as Historical Writers, 1400–1820," in *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 153–82, at 154–55.
- 8 Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670–1820* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
 - 9 Megan Matchinske, *Women Writing History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6.
 - 10 D. R. Woolf, "Genre into Artifact: The Decline of the English Chronicle in the Sixteenth Century," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19, no. 3 (1988): 321–54.
 - 11 Catholic antiquarians and historians rarely merit more than an aside in scholarship on historical writing in early modern England; see Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 52, 70; D. R. Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500–1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 186–87, 246–55.
 - 12 Parry, *Trophies of Time*, 10.
 - 13 John Marsham, "Propulatio," in William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* (London, 1661), sig. B4v: "Absque monachis, nos sanè in historiâ patriâ semper essemus pueri." All translations from French and Latin throughout are my own.
 - 14 Jean Mabillon, *Traité des études monastiques* (Paris, 1692), 322: "Ce qui a fait dite à un habile Protestant Anglois, que sans le secours des moines on ne connoistroit rien dans l'histoire d'Angleterre."
 - 15 K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Charlotte Woodford, *Nuns as Historians in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).
 - 16 David Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises and Problems in Monastic History* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1963), 37–38.
 - 17 *English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800*, vol. 1, *History Writing*, ed. Caroline Bowden (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012); *The Chronicles of Nazareth [The English Convent], Bruges 1629–1793*, ed. Caroline Bowden (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press for the Catholic Record Society, 2017).
 - 18 Scott-Baumann, *Forms of Engagement*, 14.
 - 19 Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); Peter Guilday, *The English Catholic Refugees on the Continent, 1558–1795*, vol. 1, *The English Colleges and Convents in the Catholic Low Countries, 1558–1795* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914), 256–82.
 - 20 Paul Denis, "Documents sur l'organisation des études dans la congrégation de Saint-Maur," *Revue Mabillon* 6 (1910–11): 133–56, at 149: "pour le lustre et l'honneur de l'Ordre et de la Congregation, il seroit a propos de faire travailler a l'histoire générale . . . et en particulier a celle de la Congregation."
 - 21 Vincent Thuillier, "Eloge historique de D. Claude Estiennot," in *Ouvrages posthumes de D. Jean Mabillon* (Paris, 1724), 338–41; René-Prospér Tassin, *Histoire littéraire de la congrégation de Saint-Maur* (Brussels, 1770), 177–85; Philippe Henrion, "Nouvelles

- données sur les origines de Dom Claude Estiennot de la Serrée, collaborateur et ami de Mabillon,” *Bulletin de la Société des Sciences Historiques et Naturelles de l’Yonne* 137 (2005): 279–83; Philippe Lenain, *Histoire littéraire des Bénédictins de Saint-Maur*, vol. 2, 1656–83 (Louvain-La-Neuve, Fr.: Bibliothèque de la Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique, 2008), 30–43.
- 22 Lenain, *Histoire littéraire*, vol. 2.
 - 23 Thuiller, “Eloge,” 341.
 - 24 Qtd. in Tassin, *Histoire littéraire*, 183 n: “Perjucundum mihi fuit audire, mi carissime Pater, te in eruendis vetustioribus chartis, quae cum blattis ac tineis rixantur, quaeque supersunt, illustrandis abbatiae S. Martini Pontisarenensis pulvere obsitis monumentis, operam navare ac studium impendere, ut indè historiam conficias. Id scribendi genus optimum censent viri omnes eruditi, cùm de rebus non modo historicis agitur, verùm de iis quae ad mores probè instituendos, ad exponendam S. Scripturam, & ad fidem catholicam afferendam attinent.”
 - 25 Alexandre Vidier, “Un ami de Mabillon, dom Claude Estiennot,” in *Mélanges et documents publiés à l’occasion du deuxième centenaire de la mort de Mabillon* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1908), 282–83: “Je me suis appliqué sérieusement . . . à notre petite histoire et en suis présentement en l’an 1500. . . . Le R. P. Dom Jean Mabillon m’écrit que V. R. ne treuve pas mauvais que j’entreprenne l’histoire de Maubuisson. Je le feray volontiers si Madame me veut envoyer les chartres dont j’auray besoing.”
 - 26 *Archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires*, vol. 6 (Paris, 1857), 307.
 - 27 Claude Estiennot, *Histoire des Monasteres de la Congregation des Dames Benedictines Angloises*, Box T IV 2, Douai Abbey, Berkshire, 51, 117.
 - 28 Estiennot, *Histoire des Monasteres de la Congregation des Dames Benedictines Angloises*, Haslemere 1800 VI C, Downside Abbey, Somerset, 240, 247. This manuscript switches from foliation to pagination at 62.
 - 29 Estiennot, *Histoire*, Douai Abbey, 24, and Downside Abbey, fols. 10v–11r.
 - 30 Estiennot, *Histoire*, Douai Abbey, 241: “le fonds de vingt milles Livres qui devoit servir a cette nouvelle fondation estoit assigné sur le domaine de Donquerque; qui ayant esté vendu quelques mois apres nostre establissement au Roy tres-Chrestien nous ne pûmes plus en toucher les interests.” Further citations of this text are from the Douai Abbey version.
 - 31 Estiennot, *Histoire*, Douai Abbey, 241, 284.
 - 32 I follow the conventional spellings for the last names of Henry Nevill and Anne Neville, which differ since spelling was not yet standardized in this period.
 - 33 Estiennot, *Histoire*, Douai Abbey, 33: “Madame Alexie Blanchart . . . se donna a Madame Marie Neuvill et elle receut chez cette Dame de qualité toute la bonne education que lon peut avoir dans une grande maison, et une maison de pieté comme estoit celle de Madame Neuvill.”
 - 34 Neville states that she has lived “in 4 Communities”; Anne Neville, Book of Guidance, Box T IV 1, Douai Abbey, 67 [that is, 66]. Since her compendium seems to demonstrate personal knowledge of Mary Vavasour, Brussels seems the likeliest choice for the fourth monastery.
 - 35 I base these dates on the following: “Nomina, Aetas, Tempus Professionis, et Officia praestita a Monialibus Anglis, Ordinis S. Benedicti Gandavi,” Rijksarchief, Gent,

- Belgium, Het Archief B 2773.3; Het Archief B 2773.4; Eugenia Poulton et al., statement, Nov., 19, 1641, Het archief, 2773.10; “Abbess Neville’s Annals of Five Communities of English Benedictine Nuns in Flanders, 1598–1687,” ed. M. J. Rumsey, in *Catholic Record Society Miscellanea* 5 (1909): 1–72, at 18; Estiennot, *Histoire*, Douai Abbey, 217.
- 36 “Mary Neville,” *Who Were the Nuns? A Prosopographical Study of the English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800*, Queen Mary university of London, at wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk; “Registers of the English Benedictine Nuns of Pontoise,” in *Catholic Record Society Miscellanea* 10 (1915): 248–326, at 273; “Neville’s Annals,” 40–42, 58–64.
- 37 Miscellany D 16, Box T V 6, Douai Abbey, 31–32.
- 38 “Registers of the English Benedictine Nuns of Pontoise,” 248.
- 39 Edward Scarisbrike, *The Life of the Lady Warner of Parham in Suffolk* (London, 1691), sig. A3r–v.
- 40 Thomas Willis, *An Historical Account of the First Establishment of the Convent of the English Dames of . . . St. Benedict att Bruxells* (1762), Haslemere 1874 VI C, Downside Abbey, 46–47; and *An Historical Account of the First Establishment* (1761), Haslemere 1875 VI C, Downside Abbey, 18.
- 41 Anne Neville, *The beginning of the Congregation*, Box T IV 3 1, Douai Abbey, 2–3; “Neville’s Annals,” 2.
- 42 “Neville’s Annals,” 72.
- 43 “Neville’s Annals,” 4, 18–19.
- 44 Bernard Guenée, “Histoires, annales, chroniques: Essai sur les genres historiques au Moyen Age,” *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 28, no. 4 (1973): 997–1016.
- 45 Benedict of Peterborough, *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis*, ed. William Stubbs (London, 1867), xii.
- 46 Benedict of Peterborough, xii.
- 47 Lowe, *Nuns’ Chronicles*, 36.
- 48 Estiennot, *Histoire*, n.p.: “Cet ouvrage nest q’un ramas de memoires qui serveront quelque jour a ceux qui travailleront a l’histoire d’une congregation que estant si illustre dans sa naissance ne peut quelle ne si soit extremement dans son progres.”
- 49 Estiennot, 98, my emphasis: “Madame Marie Roper fut esleüe Abbess . . . et gouverna tres sagement et avec beaucoup d’edification, son monastere pendant cinq années. Le Roy de la grande Bretagne ayant este receu magnifiquement dans la ville de Gand, vint voir nostre Communauté, et fut si edifié de la modestie de nos Religieuses.”
- 50 Qtd. in Bernard Joassart, *Aspects de l’érudition hagiographique aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2011), 61, 63: “l’amour et la recherche de la vérité des choses passées,” and “la sincérité pour la dire et l’écrire de bonne foi comme il la croit.”
- 51 Qtd. in Joassart, 66–69.
- 52 Jean Mabillon, *Traité des études monastiques* (Paris, 1692), 331: “trouver dans les saints & dans les personnes vertueuses de quoy s’édifier, & dans les méchants & les vitieux ce que l’on doit éviter.”
- 53 Neville, Book of Guidance, n.p.; Anne Neville, Book of Registers, Box T IV 1, Douai Abbey, n.p.

- 54 "Neville's Annals," 7, 47, 53.
55 "Neville's Annals," 8.
56 *Oxford English Dictionary* (2019), s.v. *compendium*, n., 2b, at oed.com/view/Entry/37541?redirectedFrom=compendium.
57 "Neville's Annals," 7.
58 "Neville's Annals," 72.
59 "Neville's Annals," 4.
60 "Neville's Annals," 40.
61 "Neville's Annals," 47, 60, 61.
62 "Neville's Annals," 60.
63 "Neville's Annals," 66.
64 Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 40.
65 "Neville's Annals," 7.
66 Roberts, "Women's Literary Capital," 247.
67 "Neville's Annals," 60.
68 Clarke and Coolahan, "Gender, Reception, and Form," 151, their emphasis.