Dorothy Arundell’s “Acts of Father John Cornelius”: “We Should Hear from Her, Herself—She Who Left a Record of It in These Words”

“The Acts of Father John Cornelius,” by Dorothy Arundell (1559/60–1613), daughter of Sir John Arundell of Lanherne and Lady Anne Stourton (both prominent English Catholic recusants and leading members of the Cornwall gentry), may constitute the only known spiritual biography of a priest authored by an early modern Englishwoman. It is also an acknowledged eyewitness account of the underground activities of Catholics in the later years of Elizabeth’s reign. The manuscript’s provenance, however, is complex. The most likely time of composition is the period following Arundell’s July 1598 entry into the new English Benedictine convent in Brussels, the Abbey of the Glorious Assumption of Our Lady, which she and her sister Gertrude cofounded with Lady Mary Percy (Guilday 256–60; see figure 1).1 She then sent the manuscript to Rome, and it has since been heavily cited by historians of the Jesuit Mission to England, all of whom affirm its presence “in the Vatican” or, according to more recent sources (including the 2009 entry on Dorothy Arundell in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography), “in the Jesuit Archives in Rome.”2

Although the early history of this manuscript is in many ways typical of early modern women’s writing, it is nevertheless striking that it has continued to be neglected during the past quarter century of intensive investigation into just such previously overlooked female-authored texts. The recent expansion of interest in two historically marginalized groups—early modern women writers and post-Reformation English Catholics—may go some way toward explaining why this text has now “surfaced.” The “Acts” was first brought to my attention in 2009 by a colleague working on illicit book production and distribution among Elizabethan Catholics.3 My request for access to the manuscript received an immediate reply
Figure 1: The first three signatures on a Latin letter dated October 1599 from the prospective members of the newly established English Benedictine convent in Brussels, the Abbey of the Glorious Assumption of Our Lady, to the papal nuncio and the Archbishop of Mechelen stating the nuns’ choice of Abbess (Mary Percy, Dorothy Arundell, and Gertrude Arundell). Fonds Kloosters, Engelse Benedictijnen/2.

from the Librarian and Archivist to the British Province of the Society of Jesus, who reported that, although the manuscript is indeed listed in archival records, it is now missing.4

Arundell’s original holograph may yet emerge from the archives, but in the interim we are attempting to reconstruct at least part of its content by collating references to her work in later biographies of Cornelius (a partial list includes More, 1660; Bartoli, 1667; Janin, 1671; Challoner, 1803; Foley, 1877; Hicks, 1929; Rowse, 1941; Caraman, 1964; Anstruther, 1969; and Edwards, 1981—discussed below). One of the few people known to have had access to the manuscript was Danielo Bartoli, an Italian Jesuit and historian, who cites Arundell’s biography of Cornelius as a source for a chapter on the martyr in his history of the Jesuits in England, Dell’istoria della Compagnia di Giesu: L’Inghilterra parte dell’Europa (1667). At present, this is my primary source-text, and an English translation is under way.5 In a slightly earlier Latin treatment of the same subject, Historia Missionis Anglicane, Henry More also includes a brief chapter on Cornelius but makes no mention of Arundell. In contrast, Bartoli gives her considerable prominence as the author of a significant biography. Although his Inghilterra may not have incorporated the entirety of the “Acts” (a late eighteenth-century biographer, Richard Challoner, reportedly had access to a copy of Arundell’s manuscript and mentions additional details [186–87]), Bartoli possesses a quality essential to our project of textual reconstruction: intense and explicit fidelity to his source.6
His own respect for the proper identification of sources is made quite clear in an earlier work, *L’huomo di lettere* (1645), in which he castigates several categories of “plagiarists.” The least egregious of these steal from “every one a little, that so few should perceive and none complain of the theft,” and the worst publish under their own names entire works written by others (132, 137). In exemplary contrast, in *L’huomo di lettere* Bartoli himself provides exhaustive marginal attributions for each of his numerous classical and contemporary references.

The same rigid standards of scholarly accuracy inform his approach to Arundell: “she is the historian of her master’s life and death,” he says, praising her as “the disciple of Father Cornelius in the perfection of the spirit” and assuring the reader that “almost everything” he is about to say is what “she herself wrote” (“Giovanni Cornelio” 352). Bartoli never claims to provide a word-for-word *translatio* from Elizabethan English into seventeenth-century Italian, but he habitually styles Arundell as author throughout, particularly when she recounts her own speech and behavior.

There may also be syntactic evidence of this concern for accuracy: in the two passages discussed here, for example, both of which concern Arundell’s personal experiences, we discovered during the translation process that the Italian syntax migrated almost directly back into English. In contrast, the surrounding narrative often required much more effort to be made consistent with English phrasing.

But in addition to these possible traces of syntactic evidence and Bartoli’s views on proper authentification, there is yet another and much more compelling reason to accept his work as a fair approximation of its acknowledged source. Arundell relates events surrounding the execution of Cornelius for his religious beliefs; he is thus a martyr, and Catholic practice in such circumstances is to compile eyewitness records in anticipation of future petitions for canonization. As a Jesuit, Bartoli is necessarily charged with providing a reliable representation of the immediate spiritual witness given by Dorothy Arundell, his faithful coreligionist.

Arundell knew her subject well. Although John Cornelius (1554–94) was to become her confessor and spiritual mentor, she first encountered him as John Mohun, a boy not much older than herself, whom her father brought into the Arundell household to be educated in the late 1560s. A dozen years later he entered the English College in Rome, a Continental seminary dedicated to the training of English Catholics for the priesthood. Upon returning to England as a newly ordained priest, he resumed his early association with the extensive Arundell family (now restricted to London because of Sir John Arundell’s active resistance to the Elizabethan Settlement in provincial Cornwall). For the next several years, Cornelius was an integral part of their covert practice of Catholicism, which included the distribution of illegally-printed Catholic books.
Dorothy herself may well have been involved in smuggling some of these illicit imprints in and out of the prisons, which were often epicenters of this activity (Havens). On July 22, 1586, for example, on Mary Magdalen’s Day, she and her sister Gertrude are known to have visited the Clink prison. Along with the Marshalsea and Newgate jails, the Clink housed large numbers of dissident Catholics throughout the later Elizabethan period. There the sisters joined a small audience assembled to hear a sermon some critics argue was delivered by the newly arrived missionary priest and accomplished poet, Robert Southwell.9 Southwell’s later publication, *Mary Magdalen’s Funeral Tears*, was personally dedicated to Dorothy Arundell.10

When Dorothy’s father died in 1594, her mother, Lady Stourton (who retained this title from her first marriage), led a large entourage of Arundell relatives and associates to the private environs of Chideock Castle, Dorset, which she controlled as part of her marriage jointure.11 According to Bartoli, this group comprised a good eighty participants (“numerosa di ben ottanta persone”), a figure substantially larger than the “twenty” or “two-dozen” generally referred to in later sources (“Giovanni Cornelio” 365).12 When Cornelius joined this extensive Catholic coterie of worshippers, he instituted a rigorous program of daily mass at 5 a.m., twice-weekly public sermons, and spiritual readings for “boys and girls” interested in the religious life.13 Under the Treason Laws, these were all subversive activities punishable by death, as was the very presence of a continentally educated priest in an English household. But Cornelius, protected by the family’s status and its connections among the dissident Catholic community, and driven as well by his own intense spiritual convictions, managed to maintain this agenda for the next four years until he was discovered during a raid on Chideock Castle in April 1594. After several months in prison (for part of that time in the home of the local magistrate, who seems to have treated him as an honored guest), he was convicted of treason and executed in August of the same year, his body quartered and his head mounted on the temporary scaffolding as a warning to other such “traitors.” In the records of the raid is a document listing Dorothy Arundell among the twenty-two family members and associates retained for questioning (Public Record Office, State Papers Domestic: Series One, 1547–1625).

In the first of my two passages, Arundell recounts her interaction with interrogators following the arrest of Cornelius. Here she narrates in the third person, framing both the questions of her interrogators and her own responses as reported speech. Inquiries about her possibly treasonous behavior are laced with sexual innuendo: “with grieved looks and words of most bitter reproach” she says, they accused her “of having burned so passionately that she would harbour, aid, and hide a public traitor, an enemy of the Queen and the kingdom.” Faced with this double attack, Arundell evaluates her options in a logical progression, initially
eliminating both denial and evasion as possible tactics: “here there was no room
to deny [the charge] or to make excuses.” Although she briefly considers whether
to try claiming ignorance “that the law prohibited such an act or that it was pun-
ished with death,” in the end she chooses to avoid self-incrimination by employing
the controversial technique popularly known as “equivocation” and more formally
referred to as “casuistry.” Students of counterreformation political discourse will
recognize her skill in “lying by telling the truth” (here and in the following excerpt
I have added line divisions to emphasize the rhetorical structure and to facilitate
comparison):

Traitors? she says, and enemies of the Queen?
I harbor these? I aid them? I hide them?
If men like this were held in this house, I know nothing about it
I do know that I have never met any of the sort.14 (Bartoli,
“Giovanni Cornelio” 355)

Here, of course, she is lying, since she has often helped to hide Cornelius; at the
same time, however, she is telling the absolute truth in the sense that there is no
possible context in which she would consider him to be a traitor (Garnet 86–87).15

This same defiant mode persists for several more paragraphs, raising a con-
cern that such dramatic phrasing might well reflect the speech patterns of the
Italian translator rather than those of the English author—a concern that is some-
what mitigated in light of an almost identical passage included by Henry Foley in
his late nineteenth-century biography of Cornelius:

I gather together traitors and enemies of the Queen!
I sustain them! I conceal them!
If you would have men of that kind I know them not:
I well know that I know none such. (455; his emphasis)

The significance of these parallel passages is yet to be fully analyzed. It is
unlikely that Foley worked directly from the Italian; if so, he changed the
Italianate word order in the first clause (“Traditori (disse) e nemici dell Reina, io
ricoglierli?” [Bartoli, “Giovanni Cornelio” 355]). Alternatively, he may have con-
sulted Louis Janin’s contemporary Latin translation, although here again the same
circumstance obtains regarding word order (“Proditares, inqit, & Reginae hostes
collegerim. . . ?” [334]). Another possibility, of course, is that Foley had access
to the original holograph or to a scribal copy, perhaps the “copy of a manuscript”
referred to in Challoner’s 1803 biography cited earlier. This could serve to explain
his more conventional subject-verb English word order and also, perhaps, his
repeated emphasis on the first person singular pronoun. In any event, I suggest that at least some of Arundell’s original sentence structure is evident in these two independent transmissions, and that the language of high drama is consistent with the circumstances she describes. The threat of pursuivant raids was ever present, and descriptions of young women willingly taking on the defense of entire households were not uncommon in the records of this tumultuous period. In addition to Arundell’s political and religious motivations for creating her record, then, there is also a degree of literary precedent for her apparent decision to model appropriate behavior for women who, like herself, were undergoing interrogation regarding capital crimes such as concealing priests and participating in banned religious services.

In my second example, Arundell shifts to the first person for the first and only time in the portions of her narrative transmitted to us by Bartoli. As he notes, this is the concluding image of the “Acts,” and perhaps because it involves a possible miracle he hedges it about even more aggressively with assertions of Arundell’s authority: “We should hear from her, herself” he says, “she who left a record of it in these words.” In this case, however, she affirms her own agency as well: “now I will add to all that I have written” (my emphasis). She and her translator display a shared concern to “preserve the chain of evidence,” as it were, by presenting her testimony as unassailable. Although this section of the “Acts” is the one most frequently cited by later historians, only Bartoli includes the extensive first-person narrative in which Arundell decides to revisit the head of Cornelius (which remained mounted on the scaffolding for about two weeks following his execution). Rather than inspiring Catholic onlookers with fear, as the Elizabethan State would have it, in Arundell’s account the martyr’s head inspires further acts of worship (she is not the only one depicted as making this pilgrimage). In effect, she creates a scene of such high gallows drama that later writers were to associate it with the imaginative creations of a later age (Foley 455).

Labeling this final portion of her account as a private communication—an indication that she may have produced this record of events in response to a personal request—she begins with her own request, one that may in fact explain why her manuscript was never published in print or even widely circulated in scribal copies: “Now I will add, she says, to all that I have written thus far about Father Cornelius, a detail which, since it pertains to me, I would unwillingly see published” (Bartoli, “Giovanni Cornelio” 363).

She represents her decision to revisit the head as a kind of punctuation, a momentary interruption of the centrally important process of pursuing her own spiritual goal:
While preparing to fulfill my religious vows (for which I sensed an obligation within myself, and having every possible diligence permitted me by mother), but also being moved by an extraordinary urge to revere the sacred head of the Father, I headed there, and having come fairly close to it, about an arrow’s flight away, I saw it crowned with light, exactly like the Moon as I have often seen it. I doubted that it came from any misperception, from a trick of my eyes, even though that day was very overcast and dark.21 (Bartoli, “Giovanni Cornelio” 363)

Although later writers insist that Arundell saw Cornelius’ head “surrounded by rays of light” and even, in one account, “through her tears,” these later and increasingly elaborate assertions are somewhat at odds with the simple descriptive vocabulary adhered to by Bartoli.22 Even after passing twice through the hands of translators, Arundell’s spiritually charged images possess a vivid immediacy conveyed largely in terms of the natural world:

. . . the closer I got to it the more plainly the crown of light appeared to me. I stopped there and beheld it on horseback for about a quarter-hour, until I was stopped from going further by passers by, and I left, thinking over what the Scripture says, that God is visible in his saints.23 (Bartoli, “Giovanni Cornelio” 363)

Much more is at issue here than descriptive style. Arundell portrays a complex and uncharacteristic socio-political event in which an unmarried Elizabethan women, with close ties to an individual recently executed for treason, apparently rides alone and unaccompanied on horseback through a darkened landscape to gaze upon a severed head that has been left as a warning to traitors. Only the trance-like immobility induced by her fixation on the distant skull, followed by the providential interference of passers by, prevents her from riding close enough to risk arrest.

According to Bartoli, Arundell begins her spiritual biography of Cornelius quite conventionally, providing details of the birth of her subject and recounting his spiritual progress. Even though she refers to Cornelius obliquely in her last sentence, however (“I left, thinking . . . that God is visible in his saints”), she largely contravenes hagiographical convention in this final passage by foregrounding the author of the account—herself—rather than its subject, Cornelius.24 His earthly mission is now complete, while hers, in accordance with plans made by the two of them prior to his death, is just about to begin (something
she has already flagged for readers by labeling this episode as an interruption of that personal mission). This shift in focus is also anticipated in a final prison letter from Cornelius, written within half an hour of his execution and reminding her of the vows she has taken under his direction. Following his habitual epistolary practice, Cornelius signs the letter with only his first name, “John,” and follows it with this postscript: “one about to die for a moment, that he may live forever.”

This juxtaposition of the spiritualized concepts of time and eternity in the context of imminent death is evocative of Robert Southwell’s language in Mary Magdalen’s Funeral Tears: “O Mary know the difference between a glorious and a mortall body, betweene the condition of a momentary and of an eternalle life” (Mary Magdalen’s Funeral Tears 61v). In the intensely spiritual atmosphere of the Chideock community, it is all but certain that Arundell and Cornelius would have discussed this sermon—and this particular martyrological trope—in preparation for the inevitable moment of his execution. Southwell expands upon a brief phrase in the gospel of John (20:17) in which the risen Christ speaks to Mary Magdalen just outside the tomb:

    Though I be not yet ascended to my father, I shall shortly ascend, and therefore measure not thy demeanour towards me by the place where I am, but by that which is due unto me. And then thou wilt rather with reverence fall down a farre off, then with such familiarity presume to touch me.” (62v)

There is reason to argue that Arundell’s richly textured ekphrasis is an enactment of the biblical text as reformulated by Southwell. His discussion of the physical distancing between the living Magdalen and the glorified body of Christ provides the apparent subtext for her own retrospective account.25

In one sense, of course, Arundell does end her hagiography conventionally, by describing her vision of the glorified head of Cornelius. But from another perspective—available to us only through Bartoli’s meticulous transmission of evidence—the miraculous head remains in the distance, never quite approachable, while Arundell herself is foregrounded in broad dramatic strokes. No longer the discepolo of her spiritual father, she locates her own agenda at the focal point of this final painterly image, while the martyr’s head, placed at what might be called the vanishing point, recedes still further into the background as she turns homeward. By placing herself in the English countryside, mounted on horseback in the concealing dusk and motivated by a spiritual impulse, she invites comparison with similar images populating the historiography of the English Mission: ranks of young seminary priests, secretly moving about in the darkness to attend to their scattered flocks.
Arundell’s actual role was to play itself out on the Continent along with the many other daughters of English Catholic families who also entered convents there, and in all likelihood she recorded these events during that next period of her life. But just for a brief moment, as illustrated by her concluding image, she places herself in a very different landscape.

Because of the multiple lines of transmission seemingly initiated by the manuscript’s arrival in Rome, I do not aspire to a complete reconstruction of “The Acts of Father John Cornelius.” It may yet be discovered, of course; failing that, although I may never be able to establish textual provenance with the level of clarity, for example, achieved by Nancy Pollard Brown in her recent study of Southwell’s A Short Rule of Good Life (2010), I nevertheless suggest that the passages presented here are reasonably accurate representations of the language and rationale—and particularly of the descriptive imagery—of Arundell’s original account. Through them readers can now “hear from her, herself” at least part of the story she told at a time when few other Catholic women authors, if any, are known to have done so.

Notes

1 The Spanish Infanta led Arundell into the church, while Mary Percy was accompanied by the Papal Nuncio. They professed as nuns along with Gertrude and several other founding members on November 21, 1600 (See figure 1).

2 The DNB entry on “Dorothy Arundell” has been silently emended in response to my communication of November 2009; it now reads “formerly in the Jesuit archives but now listed as missing.”

3 Dr. Earle Havens, Curator of Early Books and Manuscripts, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University.

4 With the continuing assistance of Thomas M. McCoog, S.J., a search is underway. Because of centuries of migration and disruption, the archival holdings of many English colleges and convents from this period are scattered or fragmentary. “Who were the Nuns?” is a research project at Queen Mary University, London, led by Michael Questier and Caroline Bowden, that is launching an online database to track membership in English convents during these periods of exile. See <http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/>

5 Translated for this article by Troy Tower, Doctoral Graduate Student, Department of German and Romance Languages and Literatures, Johns Hopkins University. Page numbers throughout refer to the 1667 edition of the Inghilterra.

6 Challoner appends this comment to his essay on Cornelius: “Since this was written I received from the English college of St. Omer’s, a copy of a manuscript concerning Mr. Cornelius, the original of which is kept in the archives of that college” (217–88).

7 Translated into English in 1660 by the Jesuit Thomas Plowden.

8 “Poscia istorica della vita, e morte del suo maestro. . . . E da lei che ne scrivea di veduta, sarà preso quasi quel tutto che io e racconterò.” Concerning Bartoli’s use of “discepolo,” there are indications in the “Acts” that Cornelius may have guided Dorothy Arundell in the formal and intensive Spiritual Exercises prescribed by St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit order. She twice refers to herself as the spiritual disciple of Cornelius (“sua discepolo a la spirito”; “Giovanni Cornelio” 352, 361), and
she includes an excerpt from a final letter by Cornelius reminding her of her religious vows (see page 10 of this essay).

9 “On that evening there was a ‘banquet’ in the Marshalsea Prison at which one or two priests and several ladies and gentlemen were present, and at which the pièce de résistance was a sermon on St. Mary Magdalen. Walsingham’s secretary passed on a spy’s report of it in shocked tones to his master: ‘Among other guests were three gentlewomen very brave in their attire, two of them daughters of Sir John Arundell!’” (Devlin 119). For a critique of earlier assumptions that Southwell delivered this sermon, see Brownlow 35 and passim.

10 According to Philip Caraman, the sermon “was later expanded and printed secretly in London under the title, Mary Magdalen’s Funeral Tears; it was dedicated to Dorothy Arundell. . . .”

11 At this time, jointures continued to be protected from recusancy fines.

12 The same number recurs later in the text, when “more than eighty” members of casa Arundell are described as weeping after a possibly miraculous event: “e piangevano tutti della famiglia in numero oltre ad ottanta” (Bartoli, “Giovanni Cornelio” 367).

13 At least one of these children pursued a religious vocation: when “John Tremaine” matriculated at the English College in 1614, he reported having made some of his “rudimental” studies in religion at Chideock. The Tremaynes were part of the extended Arundell family: a “ring of gold” valued at forty shillings was bequeathed to an earlier John Tremayne by Dorothy Arundell’s grandmother, Lady Elizabeth Arundell, in a 1564 will, which also included a comparable bequest to her granddaughter: “for my little daughter, Dorothy Arundell, a little jewel for her neck worth forty shillings” (Cornwall Record Office, AR/21/15/1, 2; June 12 and November 9, 1564). Three Tremayne women—Anne, Margaret, and Jane—were arrested during the 1594 raid.


15 In his Treatise of Equivocation, the Jesuit Henry Garnet provides defensive strategies for underground priests and the Catholics who harbored them: “whosoever frameth a true position in his mind and uttereth some part thereof in words, which of themselves being taken several from the other part reserved, were false, does not say false or lie before God, howsoever he may be thought to lie before men” (86–87).

16 Although the possibility remains that a copy or copies of Arundell’s original manuscript may be extant, no evidence has emerged other than Challoner’s late 18th-century reference (see page 3 in this essay), and chances are slim that any survived the turmoil faced by Jesuits in the following century.

17 “. . . vuolsi udire da lei medesima, che ne lasciò memoria in queste parole . . .”

18 For a discussion of the parallel instance involving Margaret More Roper and the similarly displayed head of her father, see Goodrich. Arundell would almost certainly have had this well-known event in mind, either during her actual experience or while recounting it.

19 See, for example, a speech attributed to Dorothy Arundell in “Merrye Englaunde, or the Golden Tymes of Good Queen Bess.”

20 “Hor aggiungo (dice ella) a quanto fin hora ho scritto del B. P. Cornelio, una particolarità, la quale, pereche s’appartiene a me, malvolentieri la publicava.”

21 “Sentendomi io dunque interiormente costretta all’adempimento del mio vota de Religione, e per cio, con ogni possibile diligenza licentiatami da mia madre, e volendo altresì, per uno straordinario movimento che m’invitava a faro, riverire la sacra testa del Padre, che tuttavia era esposta in su la forca, m’inviai per cola, e pervenutale da presso, quanto sarebbe il trarre d’un arco, la vidi coronata di luce,
appunto quale ho veduta piu volte la luna; Dubitai, non provenisse cio da qualche mio travedere per abbagliamento de gli occhi, avvegnache quel di pur sosse molto chiuso di nuuoli, e scuro.”

22In 1877 Foley claimed that Arundell “was astonished to see it encircled with rays of light” (472), and in 1957 A. L. Rowse elaborated further: “brave Dorothy Arundell saw it surrounded with rays of light . . . doubtless, poor woman, through her tears” (366).

23“Ma quanto piu io mi avvicinava, tanto la corona di luce meglio mi compariva. Dunque, così com’io era seduta su’l cavallo, mi fermai a riguardarle un mezzo quarto d’hora, fin che ne fui distolta dal sopragiungere de’viandanti: ed io me ne andai, ripensando meco stessa quel della Scrittura, che Iddio è mirabile ne’suoi santi.”

24Perhaps in response to this shift in focus, Bartoli draws the reader’s attention back to Cornelius by making explicit Arundell’s implied designation of the martyr as among “[God’s] saints”: “Così ella; e non punto lungi dal vero nell’appropriar che fà un così degno titolo al P. Cornelio” (“Giovanni Cornelio” 363).

25For a discussion of Southwell’s “imaginatively engaging religious verse” in the larger context of English letters, see Alison Shell (63 and chapter two passim). In a more localized study of Southwell’s imagery, Anne Sweeney examines his hyperrealistic portrayal of “biblical persons caught in the middle of spiritual crises,” arguing that “[s]uch realism allowed a new engagement, opening up a private space to be filled by the observer with his or her personal response to the affective scene” (9). In this respect, note that Arundell also creates a “private space” during her Magdalen-like ekphrasis, by not divulging the substance of her fifteen-minute meditation.

Works Cited


Cornwall Record Office, AR/21/15/1; Original Will, Elizabeth Arundell, June 12 and November 9, 1564.


