

An Invitation to Listen: Catherine McAuley, Conversion, and Religious Difference in 19th Century Ireland

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Abstract: *Catherine McAuley (1778-1841) founded the Catholic Sisters of Mercy in Dublin following the repeal of the Irish Penal Laws, which had limited Catholics' ability to own land, participate in government, or freely practice their religion. In the post-Penal period, religious debate between Catholics and Protestants aimed to convert others through agonistic debate, usually unsuccessfully. Focusing on McAuley's religious text, Cottage Controversy, and her own biography, this article traces the development of McAuley's rhetoric, arguing that it is both invitational and centered on rhetorical listening, ultimately a more viable rhetorical alternative that fosters mutual understanding and peace.*

Keywords: *history or rhetoric, women's rhetoric, invitational rhetoric, rhetorical listening*

Catherine McAuley (1778-1841) founded Dublin's Mercy Institute in 1827, which later became the Catholic order of the Sisters of Mercy in 1831. A single, Catholic woman, McAuley used the inheritance from a Protestant benefactor to found the institute that educated and provided lodging for Dublin's poor young women and girls. The Institute welcomed women of good character who preferred "conventual life [but who were] prevented [from] embracing it from the nature of property or connections" (Sullivan *Correspondence* 41). In the 14 years between McAuley's founding of the first Institute and her death in 1841, she and the Sisters of Mercy founded 14 institutes in cities around Ireland and England. As the Irish emigrated to America, Australia, and other points around the globe, the Sisters of Mercy followed, establishing orders and serving poor women and children in their new communities by founding schools, hospitals, and other social-service organizations. Although McAuley did not survive to see the rapid growth of the order in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the sisters' memories of her, her sayings, and her principles remained a guiding force for the order, and were transmitted to the institutions and organizations McAuley's successors founded. Today, Sisters of Mercy, the

Mercy International Centre, and others associated with the Sisters of Mercy continue to serve in over 40 countries, focusing specifically on issues of human trafficking, environmental justice, education, and health care.

McAuley established the Sisters of Mercy in a period in Irish history when it was difficult to be a Catholic. Although the penal laws that had been designed to limit Catholics' ability to own property, participate in government, and freely practice their religion were repealed in the last decades of the 1700s, anti-Catholic sentiment remained, making it difficult for Catholics to gain foothold in Irish political, economic, and religious life. The effects of the penal period on Catholics were long lasting; for example, after 85 years under the penal code, only 5% of Irish Catholics owned land in 1780 (Brown, et al 12). These circumstances led some Catholics to convert to Protestantism, making conversion a point of contention in the ongoing debates between Protestants and Catholics. As historians Michael Brown, Charles Ivar McGrath, and Thomas Power note, most often conversion was "reduced to a question of political rather than religious morality" (12). Typically, Catholics converted to Protestantism (rather than the other way around) not for "doctrinal commitment to the Established [Protestant] church" (Ó Conaill 289), but rather for "pursuit or maintenance of social status" (Brown et al 16). However, among the religiously motivated, conversion became a matter of saving souls, as Protestants sought to convert Catholics from "popery," and Catholics aimed to save those eschewing the "one true faith." Arguments between Catholics and Protestants were frequent in public discourse; both sides touted the conversion of others to their religion in newspapers, and personal conversion narratives were published and distributed widely (Brown 240).

According to Charles Benson and Siobhán Fitzpatrick, by 1833, 1,399,488 religious tracts and books were in circulation (141), and the Catholic Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge worked specifically to "publish works which contained 'a clear exposition of the doctrine and discipline of the Roman Catholic Church'" in an effort to convert others (qtd in Benson and Fitzpatrick 142). As a faithful woman publicly practicing a maligned religion, it might stand to reason that McAuley's rhetoric would follow the agonistic, persuasive models that Benson and Fitzpatrick describe. But perhaps because of her disenfranchised position as a Catholic woman in Irish society, or perhaps because her understanding of her religion was action-oriented, McAuley developed a rhetorical strategy that differed from more traditional kinds of conversion rhetoric, instead focusing on conversation, asking questions, and listening in order to build mutual understanding and respect.

Although McAuley was Catholic, and sought sanction from the Catholic church for the Institute's efforts, she originally had no intention of founding a

religious order (Harnett 151). McAuley believed they were too strict, and she rejected the idea of enclosure. Rather than promoting Catholicism, McAuley's primary motivation was to help others who were in desperate need. As one of McAuley's contemporaries, Sister Mary Clare Moore, wrote after McAuley's death, "All [McAuley] designed was that there might be an Establishment where pious ladies might retire for a while to exercise works of charity...in fact a Protestant convent plan" (Sullivan, *Catherine*, 88). To McAuley, it made no sense for religious women to be cloistered and isolated from others; instead, she believed she and her sisters needed to be out in the world, helping those who were materially and spiritually poor or sick so they might "give good example" to members of their community (McAuley, "Spirit of the Institute," 463). McAuley's believed religious piety was best expressed through action; as she is quoted in *Retreat Instructions*, a manual written after McAuley's death for women preparing for joining the Sisters of Mercy, "It is not sufficient that Jesus Christ be formed in us – he must be recognized in our conduct" (Purcell 72).

To understand how McAuley navigated the complex rhetorical landscape of 19th Century Ireland, I offer a rhetorical biography, a reading that aims to use McAuley's biography to interpret the rhetoric displayed in a religious tract McAuley is credited with composing, *Cottage Controversy*. This approach enables the reader to act as "an historian not of cause and effect so much as an intellectual historian [so that] a speech [or text] is viewed not so much as a catalytic agent as it is a document of ideas" (Fisher 104). By documenting ideas found in McAuley's texts alongside her biographical information and "an overview of the times and the issue," a rhetorical biography offers a more complete, contextualized understanding of McAuley, the institution(s) through/with which she worked, her rhetorical strategies, and the interrelatedness of all three (Zarefsky 436). As Fisher predicts, in the end we are left with an analysis that illustrates "the working of the mind of an historical figure, culture, or era" (108) aligning with studies of women's rhetoric that explore the "interrelationships among context, location, and rhetoric...[that] shape women's discursive options, strategies, and choices" (Buchanan and Ryan xviii). In McAuley's case, readers see the formation of a rhetoric that is both invitational (Foss and Griffin) and focused on listening (Ratcliffe), a theologically grounded rhetoric that recognizes the value of the individual and uses action and language to engage others. Although McAuley was keenly aware of and committed to the conversion of souls to the Catholic faith, her rhetoric and the example of her life were invitations to conversation rather than an outright act of persuasion, offering a model of rhetorical acts relevant to contemporary debates about highly-charged issues debated in moral terms.

Catholics among Protestants

McAuley was born into a Catholic family, the daughter of James and Eleanor McGauley,¹ in 1778. Her biographies, which were often written by women affiliated with the Sisters of Mercy, focus on her spiritual formation; however, as a member of a minority religion, her spiritual formation is intrinsically tied to her rhetorical development because she had to develop strategies for engaging with others who automatically dismissed her on the basis of her religion. McAuley did not receive direct religious instruction as a child, and “though she was obviously literate and cultured, [there is] no record of her attending a school for girls” (Sullivan *Path* 22). McAuley’s father was particularly pious, spending his Sundays in charitable work instructing the poor in their neighborhood. According to the first published biography of McAuley, “from [her father] she imbibed that devotion to the poor, that zeal for instructing, that respect for the Catholic faith which continued with her under very adverse circumstances” (Carroll 56). Soon after McAuley’s father died, the family moved in with her uncle, Owen Conway, and his family, who were practicing Catholics. While with the Conways, McAuley was able to “develop and freely practice her faith” (24). However, after her mother died, the Conway family struggled to feed so many mouths, so McAuley and her brother and sister moved in with the Armstrong family, relatives of her mother.

The Armstrongs, unlike the McGauleys and Conways, were Protestants, and the patriarch of the family, William Armstrong, was “intolerant in his assessment of Catholic religious perspectives and ‘superstitions’” (Sullivan *Path* 25). This period in McAuley’s life is often referred to as a trial, as she endured the constant criticism of her religion. McAuley and her siblings, James and Mary, did not have formal religious training during this period; moreover, they “[heard] day after day the usual misrepresentations of [Catholicism’s] rites and passages” without the benefit of alternative viewpoints (Harnett 141). In this environment, James and Mary were easily swayed to anti-Catholic sentiment, but because McAuley was older when she joined the Armstrong household, she was less influenced by Armstrong’s religious beliefs.

McAuley’s time with the Armstrongs is significant to her rhetorical biography. She still considered herself Catholic even though she wasn’t practicing, but she was ill-equipped to participate in debates about religion. When a criticism was leveled against Catholics, “she knew not in what matter to refute it” (Harnett 141) and “she was obliged to be silent, for she could not give reasons

1 The difference in spelling between McAuley’s surname and her parents’ is likely attributed to variant spellings and record-keeping during the period. McAuley’s biographers, and extant records of the time, refer to her younger brother as James Macauley, further indicating that the family did not have a standardized spelling of the name.

for the hope that lingered in her" (Carroll 67). Perhaps because of her gender, but certainly because of her economic dependence on the Armstrongs, McAuley was forced to develop an ability to listen carefully and with tolerance as a young woman. Harnett explains that while living with the Armstrongs, McAuley developed "a sincere regard and affection" for them because of their kind treatment of her and her siblings, so she "read their books, heard their explanation, [and] discussed with them the several points on which they differed" (141). This education in the Protestant faith did not sway McAuley from her religious convictions, but it taught her that good, kind people might have religious views different from her own, a tension that is borne out in a religious tract she is credited with writing, *Cottage Controversy*.

Conversation and Conversion

Sources indicate that McAuley wrote *Cottage Controversy* in 1832, at the request of Sister Mary Vincent Deasy, whom McAuley had appointed to lead the Mercy Institute at Cork (Sullivan *Correspondence* 123).² In the letter attached to the tract, McAuley encouraged Deasy to share the story with her "poor patients, who require something instructive" suggesting that McAuley intended this tract to be read to the Catholic—and Protestant—patients the sisters in Cork nursed (123). Some question about the authorship of *Cottage Controversy* remains, as archivists have not found either the essay or the letter in which McAuley claims authorship of the tract, and as Mary C. Sullivan notes, tracts with similar themes and names like "Cottage Dialogues," "Cottage Conversations," and "Cottage Controversy," the same title McAuley used, were in wide circulation at the time (*Correspondence* 123n). McAuley made a practice of revising existing texts written by other authors for her own purposes as she founded and expanded the Order (see Sullivan "Catherine McAuley's"), so it is possible that the general structure, and perhaps even the plot or characters of the tract, were borrowed. However, the circumstances of *Cottage Controversy's* plot—a Catholic woman who lives peaceably among Protestants, unwavering in her own faith but respectful of her neighbors—so closely parallels McAuley's own biography that it is likely McAuley had a hand in adapting an existing tract for her audience. Moreover, McAuley's eagerness to have her sisters share the document with their patients suggests that the rhetorical strategies and choices demonstrated by the characters in the tract reflect McAuley's own and were worthy of sharing with others.

Cottage Controversy relates six conversations, held over a period of weeks, between Lady P., the Protestant wife of the landowning Lord P, and Margaret Lewis, the Catholic wife of a trusted employee on Lady P.'s estate. Although

2 Although written in 1832, the tract was first published for a wider audience in New York in 1883, decades after McAuley's death.

Lady P. and her husband offered “pretty, convenient” cottages to their house staff rent-free, Lady P. required tenants to attend scripture lessons at the village barn, provided by the village’s Protestant pastor (McAuley *Cottage* 9). If Catholic tenants refused to attend these lectures, Lady P. evicted them from their cottages. Encouraged to stay away by their parish priest, Margaret and her husband refuse to attend the barn meetings, so Lady P. demands to speak with Margaret. This set the stage for the theological and scriptural conversations that would follow over the next several weeks between Margaret and Lady P., “activities rarely attributed to women, particularly during the nineteenth century” (Davis 353).

There is no clear subject or topic for each conversation beyond the question of the women’s religious differences and the central tenets of Catholic doctrine that the Protestant Lady P. found objectionable. In the seemingly organic conversations that move from topic to topic, the women discuss Catholics’ deference to priests as agents of God; their reverence for the Virgin Mary; the use of Latin rather than the vernacular; and the presence of religious statues, images, and icons in Catholic churches and homes. As such, the subject matter of *Cottage Controversy* is not particularly remarkable. Religious pamphlets and tracts debating these issues were in wide circulation after the penal period ended in Ireland, and they “became a favored medium for the promotion of ideas and information” (Benson and Fitzpatrick 139).

A cursory read might suggest that the dialogues between the two female interlocutors resemble classical dialectic. Lady P. raises a critique, to which Margaret responds with questions, logical reasoning, and textual evidence to support her position, such that it would seem the women were attempting to convert each other from their flawed beliefs. Thus, McAuley’s dialogue continues the tradition of Madeline de Scudéry’s *Conversations*, subverting a form that Plato, Cicero, and Augustine employed by positioning women as the interlocutors (Donawerth 23). The classical dialectic, as a form, typically follows more overtly persuasive rhetorics, including conversion rhetoric, which, according to Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin “involves the effort to construct arguments or claims so compelling that they cannot be refused—arguments that are appealing to audiences because of their substance and/or presentation” (1993, 5). Citing Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, Burke, and others, Foss and Griffin explain that conversion rhetoric is one that is “designed to engage audience members, to involve them, and to motivate them to the perspective and/or action intended by the rhetor” using traditional proofs, organizational structure, and language that privileges the speaker over the listener (5).

In post-penal Ireland, when Catholics converted to Protestantism for material rather than religious reasons, it would seem more likely that the character Lady P. would convert Margaret to Protestantism rather than the other way

around. In fact, Lady P. begins their first conversation exclaiming her eagerness to speak with Margaret because “it gives [Lady P.] an opportunity of making explanations that may be useful,” suggesting that she believed she would be able to convert Margaret (18). However, Margaret seems less focused on changing Lady P.’s mind, instead aiming to engage Lady P. in conversation about their differing beliefs. Through the course of the tract, it becomes clear that Margaret does not embrace the typical manner of rhetorical persuasion or conversion. Although Margaret is the primary rhetor in the dialogue, she does not wish to convince Lady P. of the validity of her religious beliefs in an effort to convert her. Rather, Margaret’s rhetorical aim is to come to an understanding with Lady P. that would allow Margaret to continue practicing her religion, remain in her cottage, and avoid the weekly barn meetings. Rather than aiming to convert, Margaret’s goal was to invite discussion and mutual understanding to foster peace in the village.

Margaret’s attempt to engage Lady P. in conversation links her to a tradition in women’s rhetoric that dates back to the Renaissance. In her study of women’s rhetorical tradition, Jane Donawerth points to Renaissance figures such as Madeline de Scudéry and Mary Astell, who, because they were constrained by the parlor or salon, developed a rhetoric that was necessarily rooted in conversation. Scudéry, Donawerth argues, “appropriates rhetoric for women as a means of political power—the right to speak and, so, to influence others” (25). Likewise, Donawerth claims that Astell, an Anglican woman living in England, “enlarges the importance of women’s province by [arguing that] ‘catechizing,’ or private religious instruction through conversation, is more useful than ‘discourses of the pulpit’ for one cannot understand sermons without first achieving ‘clear ideas’ of religion” (37).

Although there is no evidence that McAuley read Scudéry or Astell, conversation became a cornerstone in her own rhetorical biography as well. Unmarried, in her mid-twenties, and still living with the Armstrongs, McAuley was invited to live with William and Catherine Callaghan, friends of the Armstrong family. McAuley accepted their invitation and lived with them for nearly 20 years, becoming a beloved member of the family and caretaker to both as they aged. The Callaghans, like the Armstrongs, were Protestant, although their love for McAuley and their “[tolerance] for the freedom of conscience of others” gave her some latitude (Sullivan *Path* 35). Early in her time with the Callaghans, McAuley believed that she must continue to practice her religion in secret, praying “before a cross formed by the branches of trees...or the cross-shaped panels of the doors” (Harnett 144). Eventually, as McAuley grew in her religious convictions, she sought advice from Rev. Dr. Daniel Murray, who counseled her in religious matters and encouraged her to

practice her religion freely (just as the fictional Margaret's priest advised her). Finally overcoming her fear of angering her benefactors, whom she genuinely loved as parents, McAuley revealed her Catholicism to the Callaghans and was gratified that, despite their disappointment, they "allowed her the same freedom of choice in religion...they would have desired for themselves" (Harnett 143).

As the Callaghans aged, McAuley worried for their salvation, though her love and respect for them kept her from overtly trying to convert them to Catholicism. All the biographical descriptions of McAuley at this time refer to her as genuinely distraught, fearing for the peril McAuley believed the Callaghans would face were they to die Protestant. However, as their health worsened, and perhaps because of how much the Callaghans loved and respected McAuley, she successfully converted both of them before they died. Mary C. Sullivan describes McAuley's conversion of Catherine Callaghan days before her death in 1819 as "*conversations* about the nature of Catholic faith and practices" (*Path* 41, emphasis added). McAuley also converted William Callaghan to Catholicism before his death in 1822. After McAuley confessed her fears to Callaghan about his religion, Sullivan explains that "what ensued was a back-and-forth discussion lasting several days, in the course of which the sick man tried to reassure her of his own peace"; however, Callaghan indicated to McAuley that he was open to further conversation (*Path* 47). In the ensuing days, McAuley and Callaghan continued to discuss the issue, reading books and consulting with Catholic priests, and Callaghan officially converted to Catholicism a day before he died. Sullivan's description suggests that McAuley, rather than finding fault with the Callaghans' Protestant principles or overtly persuading them to convert to Catholicism, used her relationship with them to build common ground on which they could discuss religion and offer their varying perspectives.

An Invitation to Listen

We see similarities between Margaret's/McAuley's rhetorical strategy and Foss and Griffin's theory of invitational rhetoric, which outlines communicative options that differ from traditional suasive strategies. Arguing for a rhetoric "built on the principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination" (1995, 4), Foss and Griffin introduce the possibility that a rhetoric that aims for understanding rather than overt persuasion to affect change can in fact be an invitation to dialogue and relationship (1995, 5). For Foss and Griffin, invitational rhetoric is fundamentally tied to feminist principles of collaboration, careful listening, and respect for the other, and its ultimate "purpose is to provide the basis for the creation and maintenance of relationships of

equality” such that the rhetor does not aim to exert or gain power over his or her interlocutor (1995, 13). As Jeffrey W. Murray notes, invitational rhetoric is “a rhetoric of disruption, potentially unsettling *in an ethical sense* as a presentation of otherness” (339, emphasis original). As a Catholic amongst Protestants, McAuley (and her fictional Margaret), were in fact othered, but they used their outsider status to disrupt assumptions about their religion and their position in the community.

One way that Margaret, in particular, offers her otherness for consideration and acceptance from Lady P. is through non-verbal cues, which Foss and Griffin describe as the “clothing individuals wear [and] the places in which and how they live, and in all the symbolic choices rhetors make to reveal their perspectives” (1995, 9). McAuley spends a good deal of time explaining the neat appearance of Margaret and her home as Lady P. arrives at the cottage for their first conversation. Margaret’s cottage “had the hue and glitter of gold,” and the flowers “that adorned the porch were in full beauty” (McAuley *Cottage* 15). Margaret was “dressed even more neatly than usual,” and as Lady P. arrived, she offered “a low curtsy and timid smile” (16). Margaret’s appearance and the beauty of her cottage had an effect on Lady P. whose “love of order and quick sense of the beautiful half unfitted her for the task she had imposed on herself, so that her first words were in praise of a superb geranium, and commendation of the neatness of the cottage” (16). Lady P. was surprised by the beauty of the cottage, contradicting her prejudice against Catholics and her assumption that they were less able homemakers than their Protestant neighbors. While Margaret’s non-verbal cues might have initially distracted Lady P., they also communicated her attention to domestic order, a value she shared with Lady P., which established conditions for a more equal conversation.

In addition to non-verbal cues, Foss and Griffin describe “offering” as another communicative strategy available to invitational rhetors, a technique in which the rhetor shares “a perspective without advocating its support or seeking its acceptance” (1995, 7) with the “goal not of converting others to their positions but of sharing what they know” (8). Throughout *Cottage Controversy*, Margaret shows herself to be well-versed in Catholic doctrine and scripture, and she freely shares this knowledge with Lady P., as in the following example:

Margaret. Oh, my lady! It is through him [her priest] that I am sure of hearing the word of God; for did not God when he made the first bishops and priests say ‘Whosoever heareth you heareth me’?

Lady. It was to the apostles and his own immediate disciples that the Lord spoke thus, not to your bishops and priests.

Margaret. But, my lady, when he sent the apostles and disciples to baptize and teach, did he not promise to remain with them till the end of the world? (18-19)

Here, Margaret uses a shared belief—Jesus’ relationship with his apostles and disciples—to build understanding by offering her interpretation of their religion’s founding documents.

Foss and Griffin explain that another of the key elements of offering in invitational rhetoric is an attempt to give “explanations for the sources of her ideas rather than marshaling evidence to establish their superiority” (1995, 8). Throughout the tract, Margaret refers to scripture as a source of her belief. Early in their conversations, for example, Lady P. questions Catholics’ reliance on priests to interpret the Bible (rather than reading it themselves), and Margaret responds,

Sure it is in the Protestant Bible...how, when our blessed Saviour rose from the dead...the first thing he spoke to [his disciples] about, as if it was more on his mind than anything else ...was to save poor sinners... And he never said a word, my lady, about giving us the Bible, or getting us taught to read it; but he told how our peace was to be made with God, without printing or learning at all. (33-4)

Margaret cites a source she has in common with Lady P—the Bible—to explain the origin for her belief that listening to priests is more important to her own faith than reading and interpreting the Bible herself. Lady P. has a different interpretation, of course, which she shares with Margaret in response, but Margaret’s introduction of source material creates a situation where she and Lady P. can discuss how one text might invite multiple valid interpretations, rather than prove one reading—or one belief—is more correct than the other.

Margaret’s invitational strategies throughout the conversations had an interesting effect. Near the end of the tract, the narrator explains that through the course of the dialogues, Margaret “had no great proofs of her ladyship’s controversial skill, [but] had abundant of her conversational powers” (88). I would argue this is due, in part, to how Margaret shaped the dialogues as conversations rather than arguments. Throughout the six conversations, Margaret asks a variety of questions to clarify beliefs, to understand Lady P.’s biblical interpretation, or to ask for additional information, questions that seek to build a shared understanding between Lady P. and herself about each other’s beliefs so that they might find some tenets of faith—and some source documents—that they have in common. The asking of questions to eliminate hypotheses and foster critical thinking is a typical strategy in classical dialectic; however, Margaret’s purpose for asking questions is different, aiming to build understanding rather than secure Lady P.’s conversion.

Interestingly, Margaret's questions invite Lady P. to ask questions of Margaret. In the first conversation, Margaret asks nine questions compared to the Lady's two, and while Margaret's questions seek to build understanding, Lady P.'s simply seek to identify why Margaret and her husband aren't obeying her rules for tenancy. But as their conversations continue, the Lady asks more and more questions of Margaret. At first, the questions are personal and polite; for example, Lady P. asks about the health of Margaret's sick child (43). However, by the last three conversations, Lady P. is asking more questions than Margaret herself. The nature of Lady P.'s questions change, too. Early in their discussion, after Margaret explains why she goes to confession, Lady P. asks, "Do you really believe all this? Is it merely because the priest tells it to you?" articulating the doubts she has about the source of Margaret's religious belief (32). But in a later conversation, Lady P. asks Margaret how she and her husband can "really believe [you] receive in your sacrament, in a wafer, the real body and soul of Christ?" (49). Although her first question is somewhat combative, Margaret's explanation leads Lady P. to acquiesce some, asking curiously, "And do you feel quite satisfied that you receive Christ's body in your sacrament?" (51). By modeling a genuine kind of inquisitiveness, Margaret invites her interlocutor into the same stance, changing the tenor of the conversation.

Margaret's questioning strategy closely follows Krista Ratcliffe's notion of rhetorical listening, in which the act of asking questions and listening to their answers draws interlocutors into a "stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (17). The women's openness to each other's questions illustrates their willingness to act as both listener and speaker within the dialogue rather than simply developing retorts to undermine the other's positions.

Although the narrator explains throughout the tract that Margaret remained worried about Lady P.'s final decision about her family's tenancy, the tract ends with no resolution to the controversy that shaped the narrative; instead, the narrator explains, "I do not know if the discussions continued or not: but years after, Thomas and Margaret Lewis still occupied the pretty cottage, though they had never attended the parson's lectures in the village barn" (96). The unresolved ending suggests that Margaret, in fact, achieved her goal—not to convert Lady P., but to come to an understanding that allowed Margaret's family to remain in their cottage.

Invitational Rhetoric and Listening to (and with) Power

Recent critiques of Foss and Griffin's theory have questioned the viability of invitational rhetoric for people—regardless of gender—who are without political or persuasive agency. Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud argue that invitational rhetoric, as a theory, “presupposes conditions of economic, political, and social equality between and among interlocutors” (221). Because such conditions rarely exist, they argue that the idea of “invitational civility in situations of conflict . . . potentially [perpetuates] discrimination in the name of peace” (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 224).

Can invitational rhetoric be a meaningful rhetorical strategy when interlocutors hold unequal positions of power or influence, particularly when the rhetor attempting to create understanding is less powerful than her audience? In this context, both McAuley and Margaret would be positioned as the less powerful interlocutor, and as such, one might assume that their rhetorical choices would be limited. McAuley (and by extension, Margaret) seems to have understood that because of her marginalized position as a woman and Catholic, the traditional means of persuasion were not available to her, nor would they have been successful. Instead, she shaped her discourse in ways described by Kathleen Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones in *Rethinking Ethos*: McAuley used her agency to “interrupt representations of women's ethos, to advocate for [herself] and others in transformative ways, and to relate to others, both powerful and powerless” (emphasis original 3). McAuley interrupted others' perspective of her as a Catholic woman, changing the terms of the dialogue and moving it from a debate with a clear winner and loser to a conversational exchange of ideas that led to mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence.

Part of the reason McAuley's invitational rhetorical strategies were more successful in life and fiction, I would argue, is because they invited more privileged interlocutors into a stance of rhetorical listening. Ratcliffe frames rhetorical listening as a stance that is especially important for those with privilege to embody so as to “[challenge] such unearned privilege and power” (16). In order for more privileged interlocutors to genuinely engage with their partner's invitation to conversation, they had to consciously choose to, as Ratcliffe notes, “stand under” the discourses of others different from them so that they could “transpose a desire for mastery into a self-conscious desire for receptivity” (29). As we see with Margaret, this invitation to receptivity came from her establishing the conditions for open dialogue with Lady P., while for McAuley herself, we see her efforts to serve as an example of openness and understanding as an invitation to listen to her ideas. As a result, the rhetoric at work

in *Cottage Controversy* and in McAuley's own life invited her interlocutors to listen in a way that "engages the moral imagination, prompting moral sensitivity" (Tompkins 61). Although McAuley's real and fictional interlocutors (i.e., the Callaghans, Lady P.) may have had different religious sources for their moral principles, she knew they were individuals motivated to act by their values, and her rhetoric was defined by an invitation to act as an "ethical listening subject" to engage with others who were equally driven by their morals (Beard 19).

For McAuley, the purpose of engaging in these conversations was not to win, and we see her act as an ethical listening subject to build understanding as she oversaw the expansion of the order. She urged others—both her Sisters and her lay neighbors—to embody the humility and kindness she saw in Christ, reminding them, "He must be recognized in our conduct...Ever complying, ever forbearing, ever charitable, ever compassionate to the weakness and frailty of others—by thus imitating his life, we can testify our gratitude for his signal mercy in selecting us to be His spouses" (Purcell 72). McAuley believed that a Sister's primary duty was to "attend to thyself" (McAuley "Spirit" 459), and rather than overtly convincing others to follow God, McAuley urged her colleagues to "devote [their] lives to the accomplishment of [their] own salvation" (458). She urged her sisters to "give good example and to live in sanctity," much as she did with the Callaghans (463). If others were converted by the Sisters' conduct, McAuley viewed that as a happy by-product of their work, but not the ultimate goal.

As the order grew across Ireland and England, McAuley and a few carefully chosen sisters were on hand to lead the Institutes' foundations, and the Sisters recruited local women to join the Order and fulfill its mission in their communities. Harnett explains that women were drawn to join the Sisters of Mercy by McAuley's example. The first woman to join the order, Anna Maria Doyle, felt an "indescribable attraction" to the Mercy House she passed on her daily walks (157). The women who began working at the Institute developed friendships with McAuley, and while called to do "good work," they felt equally inspired by McAuley's actions (158). While McAuley was strict about ensuring that the new Institutes and the sisters who worked there reflected the values and mission of the mother house in Dublin, she recognized that there would be differences in each community. As she wrote to Frances Warde, who established the Institute in Carlow, Ireland, (and would later be the first Sister of Mercy invited to America), "Every place has its own particular ideas and feelings which must be yielded to when possible" (Sullivan *Correspondence* 168).

McAuley's statement demonstrates her commitment to listening to others with sensitivity and kindness, and she advised her Sisters that they must come to know a community intimately—and respectfully—as they built each Institute, adapting their message and their work to best serve the community's

needs. McAuley invited local women to join the Sisters and live communally in work and prayer, but the local women who joined the order also helped the Dublin Sisters better understand the communities they were joining so that they might serve them well. By being good and doing good, McAuley believed that Sisters might be more likely to encourage others to pursue a similar way of life; if Sisters converted others, it was through their own actions and conversations, not through argument.

As we read *Cottage Controversy* alongside McAuley's biography, we see how her religious beliefs, tested by her experience as a Catholic surrounded by Protestants, shaped her rhetoric. While living with the Armstrongs, she was inundated with suasive rhetoric, and though those times were trying, they also seemed to have taught McAuley that agonistic debate may not be an effective means of discussing religion; after all, she lived through years of it and found herself unmoved from her own religious convictions. Moreover, McAuley's ability to develop genuine affection and meaningful personal relationships with Protestants like the Armstrongs and Callaghans helped develop her respect for people of different religious convictions, a belief underscored by her desire to enact Christ's humility and care for everyone. Finally, she learned that the relationships she developed with others might be more convincing than scriptural arguments. In an argument with her Protestant brother, McAuley claimed "that she had no influence beyond that of her example" (Harnett 154). She knew that people listen more carefully to those they esteem highly, so by acting out her religious convictions, she believed she might more successfully draw others to her. McAuley created a larger platform for her ideas through the Sisters of Mercy, but she did not use it to build a public persona or debate the merits of religion in public. Instead, her rhetoric remained personal and conversational, focused on the immediate, unique needs of the person before her.

I completed the first draft of this article less than a week after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, and I began its revision shortly after the massacre at Orlando's Pulse nightclub in June 2016. I made my final copy edits less than a month after the executive order banning immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries was signed. Far from abating or moving toward resolution, the questions of religious difference in the United States have intensified and grown more complex as the public debates the nature and merits of one religion or another, one policy over another. Although much is different, one can see parallels between our current moment and 18th Century Ireland, a time when religious differences became political, and neighbors

were at odds with one another, driven apart by personal values and a desire to maintain their ways of life. It stands to reason, then, that we look to history to understand how to navigate these choppy waters with a rhetoric that charts a route to peace. Catherine McAuley and her rhetoric, one that centers on an invitation to listen, might be a meaningful model for us to consider. By building on a foundation of kindness and respect, McAuley created conditions wherein conversations between people of differing opinions and religious values might invite questions that build understanding, empathy, and peaceful co-existence. We need that today, too.

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