Prologue

Bibliography has sometimes been moved by what might seem an especially pure form of the historical impulse: the wish to use physical objects, books, to reveal something about non-physical realities: about intellectual lives, about manners or habits in the past. Viewed in this way, books have continued to signal seductively their potential as guides and markers to another age's sensibility. In fact current fascination with book provenance has perhaps derived from the insight of the *histoire du livre* school that research into book ownership could offer a novel way in to social history, one which might make visible even the elusive matters of personal preference and personal taste, always particularly difficult to recover.

This study began with the wish to provide additional evidence for late medieval female reading and book ownership. Its intention was codicological: to use for this purpose the names and marks in surviving books owned by women. The physical objects themselves and their histories, then, would provide a starting point. But, while interrogating this sometimes cryptic witness, it became clear that additional supporting testimony would be required – that material evidence in the books, while primary, might be insufficient to provide the fuller account of womens' reading which I imagined. Other forms of historical record, in particular the evidence of wills, would have to provide the lived particulars out of which the reading sprang. Despite their unreliability as tallies of books owned by individuals, their insecurity as indicators of what was generally read, and their extremely partial record of women's lives and property,[1] wills remain unparalleled in the social information they provide about networks of friendship and connection. Consequently this book has relied both upon manuscript evidence and testamentary

evidence, and both bibliographical and biographical approaches have been used.

In pursuing this inquiry, the line between female states in life appeared increasingly blurred. The cultural ideals offered to women, whether lay or religious, did not differ greatly. And this common female social formation was often based upon texts which were widely distributed and read. As a background to illustration of such reading, the book opens with an introduction that draws attention to the shared elements in female lay and religious lives, and to women's connections with each other.

Until now only one kind of female book ownership has been thoroughly tabulated – that of religious women. As a result, nuns' reading, in what follows, has sometimes served as a point of comparison against which to examine the reading of women in other forms of life: anchoresses, vowesses, widows. Hence this book first offers a bibliographical overview of English institutional libraries for women, based on their surviving books. Using the recuperative work of Neil Ker, Andrew Watson, and David Bell,[2] it attempts to revise slightly upward the estimated number of extant nuns' books, and to summarize what houses owned them and what their subjects were. It notes that book bequests made to women's houses altered their nature in the fifteenth century, and thus is able to support with evidence from female monastic history the changes which the evidence of individual books had earlier shown: the rise of a new female lay readership and the synthesis of this vernacular audience with that of religious women, their common interest being devotional reading. This chapter closes with a brief taxonomy of the structures and occasions which supported exchange of religious books among women.

The book's final chapter returns to the topic of what women read and, like the first chapter, offers an overview. It looks at selected religious incunabula which carry women's names to see what portion of these popular devotional works were female-owned and whether the titles which interested women changed with the coming of print. It thus attempts to carry forward chronologically the first chapter's slightly earlier investigation of women's religious reading.

Enclosed by these two bibliographic chapters whose method is the survey, a different sort of work is presented. The center of the book

is the histories of seven women readers. Some of these narratives had their beginnings in the books these women owned which still existed and could be held and examined (Eleanor and Dorothy Fettyplace, Elizabeth Throckmorton, perhaps Margery de Nerford). The impetus to study the other women came from their wills or their histories (Margery de Nerford, Margaret Purdans, Susan Fettyplace Kyngeston, Katherine Manne).

Half of these women, those who made wills, were lay and widowed (or divorced, as was Margery de Nerford). The other half, whose books instead witness to their reading, were for the most part nuns who would have been less likely to own the possessions usually bequeathed in wills (unless, like Syon, their order required such arrangements at entrance, as with Dorothy Fettyplace). What married women or young unmarried women read is altogether more difficult to trace, since such reading has no *systematic* conduit to the present, either documentary (these women seldom made wills) or institutional (their books do not survive as part of collective holdings). The scarcity of such evidence is reflected in this book, which includes no accounts of such female readers.

For several reasons the focus here has been on religious texts. Their preponderance, as earlier research on book bequests in wills has shown, makes it possible to see in them the common currency of book exchange. Though at least half the books mentioned in medieval wills were liturgical or devotional,[3] this does not, of course, mean that half of all medieval books fell into these categories. Books bequeathed in wills were those considered especially valuable, either economically or spiritually, and in both of these categories secular books could be less highly regarded. Consequently the use of wills, as in this study, may be thought to weight the results in favor of religious reading. In addition, though Ker and Watson's work has provided numerical evidence for religious women's book ownership, no comprehensive effort has yet been mounted to trace the survival either of secular women's books or of secular texts owned by women.[4] Indeed it is difficult to see how such a study would proceed. Thus both the disproportionate testamentary mentions of religious books and the valuable identification of nuns' surviving religious books – both wills and codices, that is – may overemphasize religious reading.

Nevetheless it is hard to deny the cultural centrality of a literature of spiritual formation. Indeed devotional books make their presence visible in other places besides wills. In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, for instance, devotional works constitute the largest subject category in the surviving output of English printers.[5] This collective judgment about such works' economic power underlines devotional books' social importance.

In fact, reading with a spiritual intention was more widespread than we find it easy to realize. The division of books into religious and secular is a recent phenomenon, and it has often been observed that categories which we judge secular such as conduct literature or romance could be read as religiously instructive. Conversely, religious texts might be appreciated in various ways. A nuns' manuscript from Barking, for instance, London, BL Additional MS 10596, includes a collection of prayers and meditations in addition to texts of the Book of Tobit and the Book of Susannah. Both these Old Testament narratives enforce a meditative awareness of divine providence's workings in a life of faith. Nonetheless both tales have suspenseful (and, in the case of Tobit, picaresque) elements and indeed a recent judgment that the Book of Tobit can be called "a Hebrew romance,"[6] suggests that the line between secular and religious texts was not always sharply drawn for medieval readers.

In addition to ownership, this study's other main area of interest is circulation, where "we still know remarkably little about the comings and goings of . . . manuscripts themselves across space . . . For a good majority of the texts that have come down to us, a vast invisible network of loans, borrowings, exchanges, sales, purchases and other less formal arrangements underpinned the spatial dissemination of Middle English [texts]."[7] The particulars of book transmission can reveal surprising juxtapositions. Nuns who at the Dissolution returned to their families bearing the remnants of institutional collections; women who read together in a secular household; anchoresses and vowesses who lent each other volumes; laywomen who enriched nuns' libraries with bequests; aunts who presented to their nieces the devotional reading so widely disseminated to both male and female, secular and religious owners; nuns who gave each other books or to whom institutionally owned volumes were assigned within the house – all these make their

appearances in the following chapters. The permeability of female lay and religious culture is in fact one of the book's most persistently recurring themes. In the act of reading, as at so many other times, women made connections among themselves, sometimes despite a degree of official discouragement. Indeed one of the ways to read this book is as a study of female affiliation.[8]

It is true, of course, that men feature prominently in all these narratives. Men who made book gifts to women, who read to women, who wrote books for women, are an important part of the story of women's reading, as A. I. Doyle's thesis very early pointed out.[9] But that narrative is not the one told here. Rather, the claims of a female culture of reading have in these pages been allowed to take precedence.

This culture appears often to flow alongside the more visible learned culture, in which sometimes men were responsible for opening a place for women. When Susan Kyngeston received her half-brother Sir Thomas Elyot's translation of St. Cyprian, she was participating as a reader in a patristic tradition which men had for centuries made available to women through translation. At other times two varieties of book ownership are discernible. Elizabeth Englefield, for instance, made a public transfer of book material recognized by society as valuable (her will bequest of her husband's law library to her sons). At the same time she made a private transfer of book material whose worth was primarily personal (her gift inscription in a book intended for her daughter-in-law, one she had herself received from her aunt). Here and elsewhere, scarcity in numbers and, often, privacy in transmission distinguish the record of women's book ownership.

The books and documents examined in this study illustrate both older and newer forms of reading, the public and the private. Hearing a saint's life read in the monastic refectory from a book such as Campsey Abbey's collection, now London, BL Additional MS 70513, or doing needlework in a courtier's chamber while listening to Hilton's *Scale*, as the Duchess of York's daily regimen specifies, one might be part of a group which read together by hearing together, in the traditional fashion common both to religious and lay lives. At the same time, other books make clear their function as private reading: Oxford, Bodleian Additional A.42, for instance, whose small size and humble materials reflect its personal use by a nun of Amesbury for meditation on the Rule.

This study's two subjects, then, are lives and networks. Examining the circumstances under which reading took place – not merely *what* was read – brings these two subjects together. Likewise, the movement of books inevitably illuminates the outlines of a particular community of readers, and such a view of reading coteries can provide a rich sense of what perusing a particular text meant culturally. Through this examination of the ownership and circulation of women's religious books I hope to offer a fuller and more revealing account of a female culture of reading and thus of women's intellectual and spiritual lives.

Introduction: Dinah's Story

> Mandate to abbess and convent of Shaftesbury forbidding the nuns to leave their house except for good cause, approved by the superior, and in the company of senior nuns of proved character.
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> It has been reported that several nuns have often been wandering outside the house in various places longer than is seemly and for frivolous reason. The abbess and prioress are enjoined to consider the punishment that overtook Dinah the daughter of Jacob for yielding to the desire to go abroad, so that the bishop is not forced to impose punishment himself [sent between September 26, 1411 and November 1412].
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> *Register of Robert Hallum, Bishop of Salisbury 1407–17*[1]

Not surprisingly, the punishment which overtook Dinah was rape. The circumstances of her transgression may now be only vaguely recalled, since the Genesis story (34:1–2) is not especially well known. Dinah had gone out "to visit the women of that [Canaanite] region" or "to see them."[2] Her subsequent violation was thus the direct consequence of her desire for female companionship. The bishop's letter intends, of course, a general caution against contact between female religious and the secular world, but in recalling Dinah the letter may have in mind, as well, the particular occasion of her downfall – female friendship. The injunction surprises us in two ways: in its linkage of sexual danger with women's meeting and also in its illustration of the closeness of female religious life to the world – particularly, as we will see, the world of women.

Perhaps in the scriptural account these two different translations of the verb – to visit or to see – are responsible for the two different interpretive paths which the story takes, for indeed in the Middle Ages Dinah's story was frequently invoked. In one tradition, which goes back

at least to John Chrysostom, Dinah appears as an example of the injudicious use of the eyes. Following this tradition, in a famous passage which condemns Eve not for eating the apple but for looking at it, *Ancrene Wisse* comments, "all the misery that now is, and has been and ever shall be, all this arose through sight . . . The beginning and the root of all this misery was a light glance." Dinah's guilt is defined even more narrowly than Eve's. "Dinah's evil was not the result of her seeing Sichem . . . with whom she sinned, but the result of her allowing him to look upon her."[3] That is, even though Dinah was in fact raped, the author suggests that her guilt lay, first, in her own non-sexual gaze, and then in her willing exposure to the gaze of others.

In the other interpretation, the one Bishop Hallum invokes, Dinah's fault is not her gaze but her movement. Her rape occurs as the direct consequence of her wandering. This gloss occurs as early as Jerome, whose well-known letter to Eustochium warns: "Go not out from home, nor wish to behold the daughters of a strange country . . . Dinah went out and was ravished." As late as the last decade of the fifteenth century Bishop John Alcock of Ely repeated this reading, telling nuns that Dinah "wolde go forth among yonge people and soo was corrupte and rauysshed."[4] Here she serves as a caution to religious women toward whom, from the Carolingian period through the end of the Middle Ages, repeated commands enforcing strict claustration were directed.[5]

Dinah's story can sustain a third reading, however, one in which the focus is her relation with other women. We might look below the commentators' plausible formulation – contact with other women leads to more dangerous contact with men – to discern a substratum of unacknowledged yet powerful unease with such female groupings. In this reading, the most telling aspect of Dinah's story might be the frequency of its reiteration. This cautionary re-use suggests not only that women continued their attempts to join the world outside with that inside the cloister, but also that they continued to see bonds forged between women as superseding the identifying constructions of lay and religious life.

PERMEABLE PARTITIONS

Medieval women's choices of state in life ranged along a spectrum whose extreme poles were represented by the wife and the nun. Episcopal

emphasis on claustration may have had the effect of reducing further the options which lay between these two extremes, that is, of confining authorized forms of female religious life to a single model, the enclosed one.[6] Nevertheless Kaspar's Elm's work has shown how as early as the twelfth century contemporaries described a variety of groups as occupying a middle way between lay and religious states. These groups, which included male and female anchorites and hermits, hospital brothers and sisters, beguines, and religious confraternity members, he called semi-religious.[7] John van Engen's masterful survey has made it possible to see how, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, these marginal categories were defined, resisted, and, sometimes, legitimized.[8] Such states of life seem sometimes to admit more readily the possibility of individual construction by the women who preferred them. In late medieval England, women whose choices lay between the two poles might be vowesses – laywomen who had taken vows of chastity and who were most often, though not always, widows. Or they might be anchoresses, whose choice of an enclosed life could be made by either religious or laywomen. Female states in this central area on the spectrum lay close to one another and, often, close to that of religious women. For instance if a widow living with a community of nuns had her dwelling within the nunnery complex, participated in divine office, and wore the dark clothing and *barbe* customary for widows, the physical signs distinguishing her from the rest of the community would surely be minimal. This physical likeness between nun and vowess might in turn be taken as reflecting an underlying similarity in lay and religious women's formation.

The closeness of female secular and religious life is visible in a common spirituality which transcends state in life and which often presents only marginally differentiated ideals to secular and religious women: humility, obedience, some degree of physical enclosure. These ideals are supported as well by common texts, which were read both by laywomen and nuns.[9] Women's religious reading, and particularly the exchange of books which supported such reading, will be the subject of what follows. In order to see these social practices more clearly, however, we must raise a topic which at first may appear only distantly relevant: the narrative of religious women's enclosure.

The great historian of institutional religious life for women, Eileen Power, devotes one chapter in her *Medieval English Nunneries* to the

relation of nuns with the world (it is titled "Fish Out of Water") and a second chapter to the encroachments of the world into the cloister. Jane Schulenburg has used B. Dolhagaray's terms to describe these states: active and passive cloister, respectively.[10] The relation of the two has not been much discussed, and whether historically one occurred without the other is unclear.

Power traces the former, the effort to enforce female claustration, beginning as early as Caesarius of Arles' (*c.* 470–543) rule for nuns, but she notes that the first general law on the subject which bound the whole church was Boniface VIII's bull *Periculoso* (1299). For the next two centuries and beyond, nuns who left their institutions to visit friends and family, or more broadly, to view life outside the cloister or to participate in it, were repeatedly reproved and disciplined, mostly by local episcopal authorities. Power comments pithily: "the constant repetition of the order that nuns should not leave their convents is the measure of its failure." She notes that the church's efforts here in fact added a fourth vow, claustration, to the three familiar promises of poverty, chastity, and obedience.[11] It has recently been observed that a Lateran decree of 1215 forbidding new women's orders had already effectively circumscribed the options available to women, and that the subsequent appearance of *Periculoso* effectively reshaped female religious life still further, privatizing it and ruling out active apostolates in the world such as the friars had initiated.[12] It may be, as Elizabeth Makowski has observed, that *Periculoso* represented an attempt to cordon off nuns from contemporary women's religious movements and, if this is so, we might hear an echo of Dinah's story once again in the effort to separate some women from other women.[13]

It is easy to see these strictures as attempts to deal with a central issue: enclosure. But the reciprocal nature of the commands – keeping nuns in and secular women (in particular) out – suggests that instead the issue might be called permeability, the degree to which secular culture influenced religious life. Episcopal injunctions constituted an effort to stiffen and strengthen the membrane which separated the institution from the world. Yet the later Middle Ages saw everywhere an increased interpenetration of these realms. Speaking of male Benedictine monks from the twelfth century on, Barbara Harvey says that, when they looked at the world outside the cloister, "they liked much of what they saw and