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MEDIEVAL ENGLISH NUNNERIES

CHAPTER I

THE NOVICE

Then, fair virgin, hear my spell,
For I must your duty tell.
First a-mornings take your book,
The glass wherein yourself must look;
Your young thoughts so proud and jolly
Must be turn'd to motions holy;
For your busk, attires and toys,
Have your thoughts on heavenly joys:
And for all your follies past,
You must do penance, pray and fast.
You shall ring your sacring bell,
Keep your hours and tell your knell,
Rise at midnight to your matins,
Read your psalter, sing your Latins;
And when your blood shall kindle pleasure,
Scourge yourself in plenteous measure.
You must read the morning mass,
You must creep unto the cross,
Put cold ashes on your head,
Have a hair cloth for your bed,
Bind your beads, and tell your needs,
Your holy Aves and your Creeds;
Holy maid, this must be done,
If you mean to live a nun.

The Merry Devil of Edmonton.

THERE were in England during the later middle ages (c. 1270–1536) some 138 nunneries, excluding double houses of the Gilbertine order, which contained brothers as well as nuns. Of these over one half belonged to the Benedictine order and about a quarter (localised almost entirely in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire) to the Cistercian order. The rest were distributed as follows: 17 to the order of St Augustine and one (Minchin Buckland), which belonged to the order of St John of Jerusalem and followed the Austin rule, four to the Franciscan order, two to the Cluniac order, two to the Premonstratensian order and one to the Dominican

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order. There was also founded in the fifteenth century a very famous double house of the Brigittine order, Syon Abbey. Twenty-one of these houses had the status of abbeys; the rest were priories. They were distributed all over the country, Surrey, Lancashire, Westmorland and Cornwall being the only counties without one, but they were more thickly spread over the eastern than over the western half of the island. They were most numerous in the North, East and East Midlands, to wit, in the dioceses of York, Lincoln (which was then very large and included Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Rutland, Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Leicestershire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and part of Hertfordshire) and Norwich; there were 27 houses in the diocese of York, 31 in the diocese of Lincoln, ten in the diocese of Norwich and in London and its suburbs there were seven. On the other hand if nunneries were most plentiful in the North and East Midlands it was there that they were smallest and poorest. The wealthiest and most famous nunneries in England were all south of the Thames. Apart from the new foundation at Syon, which very soon became the largest and richest of all, the greatest houses were the old established abbeys of Wessex, Shaftesbury, Wilton, St Mary's Winchester, Romsey and Wherwell, which, together with Barking in Essex were all of Anglo-Saxon foundation; and Dartford in Kent, founded by Edward III. The only houses north of the Thames which approached these in importance were Godstow and Elstow Abbeys, in Oxfordshire and Bedfordshire respectively; the majority were small priories with small incomes.

An analysis of the incomes and numerical size of English nunneries at the dissolution gives interesting and somewhat startling results. Out of 106 houses for which information is available only seven had in 1535 a gross annual income of over £450 a year. The richest were Syon and Shaftesbury with £1943 and £1324 respectively; then came Barking with £862, Wilton with £674, Amesbury with £595, Romsey with £528 and Dartford with £488. Five others (St Helen's Bishopsgate, Haliwell and the Minories all in London, Elstow and Godstow) had from £300 to £400; nine others (Nuneaton, Clerkenwell, Malling, St Mary's Winchester, Tarrant Keynes, Canonsleigh, Campsey, Minchin Buckland and Lacock) had from £200 to £300. Twelve had between

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£100 and £200 and no less than 73 houses had under £100, of which 39 actually had under £50; and it must be remembered that the net annual income, after the deduction of certain annual charges, was less still[1]. An analysis of the numerical size of nunneries presents more difficulties, for the number of nuns given sometimes differs in the reports referring to the same house and it is doubtful whether commissioners or receivers always set down the total number of nuns present at the visitation or dissolution of a house; while lists of pensions paid by the crown to ex-inmates after dissolution are still more incomplete as evidence. A rough analysis, however, leaves very much the same impression as an analysis of incomes[2]. Out of 111 houses, for which some sort of numerical estimate is possible, only four have over thirty inmates, viz. Syon (51), Amesbury (33), Wilton (32) and Barking (30). Eight (Elstow, the Minories, Nuneaton, Denny, Romsey, Wherwell, Dartford and St Mary's Winchester) have from 20 to 30; thirty-six have from 10 to 20 and sixty-three have under 10. These statistics permit of certain large generalisations. First, that the majority of English nunneries were small and poor. Secondly, that, as has already been pointed out, the largest and richest houses were all in London and south of the Thames; only four houses north of that river had gross incomes of over £200 and only three could boast of more than 20 inmates. Thirdly, the nunneries during this period owned land and rents to the annual value of over £15,500 and contained perhaps between 1500 and 2000 nuns.

To understand the history of the English nunneries during the later middle ages it is necessary not only to understand the smallness and poverty of many of the houses and the high repute of others; it is necessary also to understand what manner of women took the veil in them. From what social classes were the nuns drawn, and for what reason did they enter religion? What

[1] Based on Professor Savine's analysis of the returns in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History), I, 269–288.

[2] I have based this estimate partly on a list compiled by M. E. C. Walcott, *English Minsters*, vol. II ("The English Student's Monasticon"), partly on one compiled by Miss H. T. Jacka in an unpublished thesis on *The Dissolution of the English Nunneries*; the figures, if not always exactly correct, are approximately correct as far as the classification into groups, according to size, is concerned. It must be remembered, however, that there were more nuns at the beginning than at the end of the period 1270–1536; the conventions tended to diminish in size, especially those which were poor and small to begin with.

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function did monasticism, so far as it concerned women, fulfil in the life of medieval society?

It has been shown that the proportion of women who became nuns was very small in comparison with the total female population. It has indeed been insufficiently recognised that the medieval nunneries were recruited almost entirely from among the upper classes. They were essentially aristocratic institutions, the refuge of the gently born. At Romsey Abbey a list of 91 sisters at the election of an abbess in 1333 is full of well-known county names[1]. The names of Bassett, Sackville, Covert, Hussey, Tawke and Farnfold occur at Easebourne[2]; Lewknor, St John, Okehurst, Michelgrove and Sidney at Rusper[3], the two small and poor nunneries in Sussex. The return of the subsidy in 1377 enumerates the sisters of Minchin Barrow and, as their historian points out, "among the family names of these ladies are some of the best that the western counties could produce"[4]. The other Somerset houses were equally aristocratic, and an examination of the roll of prioresses for almost any medieval convent in any part of England will give the same result, even in the smallest and poorest nunneries, the inmates of which were reduced to begging alms[5]. These ladies appear sometimes to have had the spirit of their race, as they often had its manners and its tastes. For 21 years Isabel Stanley, Prioress of King's Mead, Derby, refused to pay a rent due from her house to the Abbot of Burton; at last the Abbot sent his bailiff to distrain for it and she spoke her mind in good set terms. "Wenes these churles to overlede me," cried this worthy daughter of a knightly family, "or sue the lawe agayne me? They shall not be so hardy but they shall avye upon their bodies and be nailed with arrows; for I am a gentlewoman, comen of the greatest of Lancashire and Cheshire, and that they shall know right well"[6]. A tacit recognition of the aristocratic

[1] These are discussed in Liveing, *Records of Romsey Abbey*, pp. 112 *sqq*.

[2] *V.C.H. Sussex*, II, p. 84.

[3] *Ib.* II, p. 63.

[4] Hugo, *Medieval Nunneries of the County of Somerset, Minchin Barrow*, p. 108.

[5] Well-known names occur, for instance, among the prioresses of the poor convents of Ivinghoe, Ankerwyke and Little Marlow in Bucks. *V.C.H. Bucks*, I, p. 355.

[6] Lysons, *Magna Britannia*, V, p. 113. Compare the remark of a nun of Wenningsen, near Hanover, who considered herself insulted when the great reformer Busch addressed her not as "Klosterfrau" but as "Sister." "You are not my brother, wherefore then call me sister? My brother is

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character of the convents is to be found in the fact that bishops were often at pains to mention the good birth of the girls whom, in accordance with a general right, they nominated to certain houses on certain occasions. Thus Wykeham wrote to the Abbess of St Mary's Winchester, bidding her admit Joan Bleden, "quest de bone et honeste condition, come nous sumes enformes"[1]. More frequently still the candidates were described as "domicella" or "damoysele"[2]. At least one instance is extant of a bishop ordering that all the nuns of a house were to be of noble condition[3].

The fact that the greater portion of the female population was unaffected by the existence of the outlet provided by conventual life for women's energies is a significant one. The reason for it—paradoxical as this may sound—lies in the very narrowness of the sphere to which women of gentle birth were confined. The disadvantage of rank is that so many honest occupations are not, in its eyes, honourable occupations. In the lowest ranks of society the poor labourer upon the land had no need to get rid of his daughter, if he could not find her a husband, nor would it have been to his interest to do so; for, working in the fields among his sons, or spinning and brewing with his wife at home, she could earn a supplementary if not a living wage. The tradesman or artisan in the town was in a similar position. He recognised that the ideal course was to find a husband for his growing girl, but the alternative was in no sense that she should eat out her heart and his income during long years at home; and if he were too poor to provide her with a sufficient dower, he could and often did apprentice her to a trade. The number of industries which were carried on by women in the middle ages shows that for the burgess and lower classes there were other outlets besides marriage; and then, as now, domestic service provided for many. But the case of the well-born lady was different. The knight or the county gentleman could not apprentice his superfluous

clad in steel and you in a linen frock" (1455). Quoted in Coulton, *Medieval Garner*, p. 653.

[1] *Wykeham's Register* (Hants. Rec. Soc.), II, p. 462. Cf. *ib.* II, p. 61.

[2] E.g. *Reg....of Rigaud de Asserio* (Hants. Rec. Soc.), p. 394; *Reg....Stephani Gravesend* (Cant. and York. Soc.), p. 200; *Wykeham's Register*, *loc. cit.*

[3] Bishop Cobham of Worcester at Wroxall in 1323 (*V.C.H. Warwick*, II, p. 71). Cf. the case of Usk in Monmouthshire, "in quo monasterio solum virgines de nobili prosapia procreate recipi consueverunt et solent" (*Chron. of Adam of Usk*, ed. E. M. Thompson, p. 93).

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daughters to a pursemaker or a weaver in the town; not from them were drawn the regrateresses in the market place and the harvest gatherers in the field; nor was it theirs to make the parti-coloured bed and shake the coverlet, worked with grapes and unicorns, in some rich vintner's house. There remained for him, if he did not wish or could not afford to keep them at home and for them, if they desired some scope for their young energies, only marriage or else a convent, where they might go with a smaller dower than a husband of their own rank would demand.

To say that the convents were the refuge of the gently born is not to say that there was no admixture of classes within them. The term gentleman was becoming more comprehensive in the later middle ages. It included the upper class proper, the families of noble birth; and it included also the country gentry. The convents were probably at first recruited almost entirely from these two ranks of society, and a study of any collection of medieval wills shows how large a proportion of such families took advantage of this opening for women. A phrase will sometimes occur which shows that it was regarded as the natural and obvious alternative to marriage. Sir John Daubriggecourt in 1415 left his daughter Margery 40 marks, "if she be wedded to a worldly husband, and if she be caused to receive the sacred veil of the order of holy nuns" ten pounds and twenty shillings rent[1], and Sir John le Blund in 1312 bequeathed an annuity to his daughter Ann, "till she marry or enter a religious house"[2]. The anxiety of the upper classes to secure a place for their children in nunneries sometimes even led to overcrowding. At Carrow the Prioress was forced to complain that "certain lords of England whom she was unable to resist because of their power" forced their daughters upon the priory as nuns, and in 1273 a papal bull forbade the reception of more inmates than the revenues would support[3]. Archbishop William Wickwane addressed a similar mandate to two Yorkshire houses, Wilberfoss and Nunkeeling, which public rumour had informed him to be overburdened with nuns and with secular boarders "at the instance of nobles"[4]; and in 1327 Bishop

[1] Gibbons, *Early Lincoln Wills*, p. 117.
[2] Sharpe, *Cal. of Wills enrolled in the Court of Husting*, I, p. 236. Cf. *ib.* I, p. 350 and *Testamenta Eboracensia* (Surtees Soc.), I, pp. 170, 354.
[3] Dugdale, *Mon.* IV, p. 71.
[4] *Reg. of Archbishop William Wickwane* (Surtees Soc.), p. 113.

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Stratford wrote to Romsey Abbey that the house was notoriously burdened with ladies beyond the established number, and that he had heard that the nuns were being forced to receive more "damoyseles" as novices, which he forbade without special licence[1]. A very strong personal connection must in time have been established between a nunnery and certain families from which, in each generation, it received a daughter or a niece and her dower. Such was the connection between Shouldham and the Beauchamps[2] and between Nunmonkton and the Fairfaxes[3]. A close link bound each nunnery to the family of its patron. Thus we find a Clinton at Wroxall and a Darcy at Heynings; nor is it unlikely that these noble ladies sometimes expected privileges and homage more than the strict equality of convent life would allow, if it be permissible to generalise from the behaviour of Isabel Clinton[4] and from the fact that Margaret Darcy received a rather severe penance from Bishop Gynewell in 1351 and a special warning against going beyond the claustral precincts or speaking to strangers[5], while in 1393 there occurs the significant injunction by Bishop Bokyngham that no sister was to have a room to herself except Dame Margaret Darcy (doubtless the same woman now grown elderly and ailing) "on account of the nobility of her race"; an old lady of firm will and (despite his careful mention of extra pittances and of tolerating for a while) a somewhat sycophantic prelate[6].

[1] Liveing, *Records of Romsey Abbey*, p. 98.

[2] William de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, mentions two daughters, nuns at Shouldham, in his will (1296). Sir Guy de Beauchamp mentions his little daughter Katherine, a nun there (1359) and his father Thomas de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, mentions the same Katherine and his own daughter Margaret, nuns there (1369). Katherine was still alive in 1400, when she is mentioned in the next Earl's will. *Testamenta Vetusta*, I, pp. 52, 63, 79, 153.

[3] See below, p. 15.

[4] See below, pp. 39–40.

[5] "Et pur certayn cause nous auens enioynt a dame Margaret Darcy, vostre soer, qel ne passe les lieus de cloistre, cest assauoir de quoer, de cloistre, de ffraitour, dormitorie ou fermerie, tantque nous en aueroms autre ordeigne, et qele ne parle od nul estraunge gentz, et soit darreyn enstalle, et en chescun lieu qele ne porte anele, et qele die chescun iour un sautier et june la quarte et la sexte ferie a payn et eu. Ensement voilloms qe la dit dame Margaret se puisse confesser au confessour de vostre couent quant ele auera mester." *Linc. Epis. Reg. Memo. Gynewell*, f. 34*d*. It looks like the penance for immorality.

[6] "Item quod nulla monialis ibidem cameram teneat priuatam, sed quod omnes moniales sane in dormitorio et infirme in infirmaria iaceant

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It is worthy of notice that Chaucer has drawn an unmistakable "lady" in his typical prioress. There is her delicate behaviour at meals:

> At mete wel ytaught was she with-alle;
> She leet no morsel from her lippes falle,
> Ne wette hir fingres in hir sauce depe.
> Wel coude she carie a morsel, and wel kepe,
> That no drope ne fille upon hir brest.
> In curteisye was set ful muche hir lest.
> Hir over lippe wyped she so clene,
> That in hir coppe was no ferthing sene
> Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.
> Ful semely after hir mete she raughte[1].

This was the *ne plus ultra* of feudal table manners; Chaucer might have been writing one of those books of deportment for the guidance of aristocratic young women, which were so numerous in France. So the *Clcf d'Amors* counsels ladies who would win them lovers[2], and even so Robert de Blois depicts the perfect diner. Robert de Blois' ideal, the chivalrous, frivolous, sensuous ideal of "courtesy," which underlay the whole aristocratic conception of life and the attainment of which was the criterion of polite society, is the ideal of the Prioress also:

> "Gardez vous, Dames, bien acertes,"
> "Qu'au mengier soiez bien apertes;
> C'est une chose c'on moult prise
> Que là soit dame bien aprise.
> Tel chose torne à vilonie
> Que toutes genz ne sevent mie;
> Se puet cil tost avoir mespris
> Qui n'est cortoisement apris[3]."

Later he warns against the greedy selection of the finest and largest titbit for oneself, on the ground that "n'est pas *cortoisie*."

atque cubant, preter dominam Margaretam Darcy, monialem prioratus antedicti, cui ob nobilitatem sui generis de camera sua quam tenet in privata, absque tamen alia liberata panis et ceruisie, extra casum infirmitatis manifeste, volumus ad tempus tollerare." *Linc. Epis. Reg. Memo. Buckingham*, f. 397*d*.

[1] *Canterbury Tales* (ed. Skeat), Prologue, ll. 127 ff. It is interesting to notice that the *Roman de la Rose*, of which Chaucer translated a fragment, contains some remarks upon this subject which are almost paraphrased in his description of Madame Eglentyne.

[2] *La Clef d'Amors...*, ed. Doutrepont (1890), v, 3227 ff.

[3] Le Chastiement des Dames (Barbazon and Méon, *Fabliaux et Contes*, II, p. 200).

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The same consideration preoccupies Madame Eglentyne at her supper: "in *curteisye* was set ful muche hir lest." Good manners, elegant deportment, the polish of the court, all that we mean by nurture, these are her aim:

> And sikerly she was of greet disport,
> And ful plesaunt, and amiable of port,
> And peyned her to countrefete chere
> Of court, and been estatlich of manere,
> And to be holden digne of reverence.

Her pets are the pets of ladies in metrical romances and in illuminated borders; "smale houndes," delicately fed with "rosted flesh, or milk and wastel-bread." Her very beauty

> (Hir nose tretys; hir eyen greye as glas,
> Hir mouth ful smal, and ther-to soft and reed;
> But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
> It was almost a spanne brood, I trowe;
> For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe)

conforms to the courtly standard. Only the mention of her chanting of divine service (through the tretys nose) differentiates her from any other well-born lady of the day; and if Chaucer had not told us whom he was describing, we might never have known that she was a nun. It was in these ideals and traditions that most of the inmates of English convents were born and bred.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, another class rose into prominence and, perhaps because it was originally drawn to a great extent from the younger sons of the country gentry, found amalgamation with the gentry easy. The development of trade and the new openings for the employment of capital had brought about the rise of the English merchant class. Hitherto foreigners had financed the English crown, but during the first four years of the Hundred Years' War it became clear that English merchants were now rich and powerful enough to take their place; and the triumph of the native was complete when, in 1345, Edward III repudiated his debts to the Italian merchants and the Bardi and Peruzzi failed. Henceforth the English merchants were supreme; on the one hand their trading ventures enriched them; on the other they made vast sums out of farming the customs and the war subsidies in return

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for loans of ready money, and out of all sorts of government contracts. The successful campaigns of Crécy and Poitiers were entirely financed by these English capitalists. Not only trade but industry swelled the ranks of the *nouveaux riches* and the clothiers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries grew rich and prospered. Evidences of the wealth and importance of this middle class are to be found on all sides. The taxation of movables, which from 1334 became an important and in time the main source of national revenue, indicates the discovery on the part of the government that the wealth of the nation no longer lay in land, but in trade. The frequent sumptuary acts, the luxury of daily life, bear witness to the wealth of the *nouveaux riches*; and so also do their philanthropic enterprises, the beautiful churches which they built, the bridges which they repaired, the gifts which they gave to religious and to civic corporations. And it was in the fourteenth century that there began that steady fusion between the country gentry and the rich burgesses, which was accomplished before the end of the middle ages and which resulted in the formation of a solid and powerful middle class. The political amalgamation of the two classes in the lower house of Parliament corresponded to a social amalgamation in the world outside. The country knights and squires saw in business a career for their younger sons; they saw in marriage with the daughters of the mercantile class a way to mend their fortunes; the city merchants, on the other hand, saw in such alliances a road to the attainment of that social prestige which went with land and blood, and were not loath to pay the price. "Merchants or new gentlemen I deem will proffer large," wrote Edmund Paston, concerning the marriage of one of his family. "Well I wot if ye depart to London ye shall have proffers large"[1].

This social amalgamation between the country gentry and the "new gentlemen," who had made their money in trade, was naturally reflected in the nunneries. The wills of London burgesses, which were enrolled in the Court of Husting, show that the daughters of these well-to-do citizens were in the habit of taking the veil. There is even more than one trace of the aristocratic view of religion as the sole alternative to marriage. Langland, enumerating the good deeds which will win pardon for

[1] See Mrs Green, *Town Life in the Fifteenth Century*, II, pp. 77–80.

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