

# Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Adobe Garamond 11.5/14 pt.     *System*  $\text{\TeX}$  2 $\epsilon$  [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 81221 6 hardback

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## Ownership and transmission of books: women's religious communities

In the 1460s or 1470s the abbess of the London minoresses, Elizabeth Horwode, acquired a volume containing three texts of Walter Hilton's authorship. An inscription, probably somewhat later than the book's purchase, allows us to see with unusual fullness the way in which the abbess' community constructed the act of reading. On the verso of the volume's last leaf is written:

Dame Elyzabeth Horwode Abbas of the Menoresse off London to  
her gostle Comfforthe bow3th thys boke hyt to Remyne to the  
Vse off þe Systerr̃es of þe sayde place to pray for þe yeuer & For  
þe sowles off hyr Fader & her moder Thomas Horwode & Beatryxe  
& þe sowle off Mayster Robert Alderton<sup>1</sup>

These words place reading firmly within a network of reciprocity. Acquisition of the book is itself meritorious, a preliminary to virtuous reading, and that preparatory act will radiate its benefits backward in time to the abbess' parents and forward to future members of her house. Book purchase is placed in a context doubly familial: both the abbess' natal family and her religious one are invoked in a way which makes it impossible to view reading as individual work. Indeed the inscription, coming as it does a little later than Abbess Horwode's acquisition of the book, and probably written by someone else, is itself a work of *pietas* which sets out the house's past for those still to come. This vision links the buyer, her personal and her institutional history, and the reading of multitudes of other women, in a network of "common profit." Though this rubric has been applied to a small group of manuscripts intended for broad circulation, it might with equal accuracy describe Elizabeth Horwode's

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book, and indeed many other volumes whose owners likewise make clear, through their statements in wills and their inscriptions in books, their understanding of reading as an element in spiritual obligation toward others.

The arrangement which Abbess Horwode made – to commemorate the souls of the dead and simultaneously to provide for the spiritual progress of the living – was one of the many social consequences produced by belief in purgatory. This doctrine has been described as a “system of solidarity between the living and the dead [which] instituted an unending circular flow.”<sup>2</sup> Arrangements for book ownership and circulation provided one way in which that solidarity could be reinforced, and the forms which such arrangements took were various. Abbess Horwode’s is only one of many such books, given in exchange for prayers to all sorts of institutional libraries: Oxford and Cambridge colleges as well as male and female monasteries.<sup>3</sup> Bell has provided other examples from women’s institutions: for instance, a thirteenth-century psalter was given to Goring, “ut ipse orent . . . in uita quam in morte” for Robert and Joan Heryard.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps, however, Abbess Horwode’s gift to her monastery had something to do with more recent currents as well. Other schemes for transmission of books among a variety of owners – and hence for multiplication of prayers – have been traced by Wendy Scase. She describes arrangements to provide books for secular priests in particular need of them, books for laity in danger of heretical contamination, and books for a less firmly specified audience which included lay persons (the common profit books).<sup>5</sup> So many forms of book transmission suggest that systematized book exchange was by the mid-fifteenth century a widespread practice, established through mechanisms which were becoming more and more common – or at least more and more visible to us. Abbess Horwode’s purchase, coming as it did about the same time as similar efforts in other *milieux*, may be considered part of this development of structures for book transmission which was making books more accessible to newer audiences, including women. But the abbess’ initiative also reflects well-established traditions: the Franciscan interest in books and more generally the monastic practice of institutional book acquisition.

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Indeed, it is this institutional tradition, to which the minoress inscription testifies, which provides substantial evidence for women's reading.<sup>6</sup> Institutions' power of endurance is so much greater than that of individuals that it is here, within a communal female culture, that we may ask first about women's intellectual and spiritual lives. In the chapters which follow this one, we will see that even women who were formally lay, like anchoresses or vowesses, were often connected physically with women's religious houses, and we may judge the forms of female secular and religious life to have been mutually influential. Thus exploration of women's reading finds a convenient starting place in the record of institutional book holding – that is, first, in the history of religious women's houses, then of their libraries, and finally of female networks of exchange, based on books' inscriptions.

#### WOMEN'S HOUSES: AN OVERVIEW

Female communities were, throughout their history, fewer, poorer, and smaller than male religious houses. The degree to which all three of these descriptive adjectives can be applied is perhaps surprising. Based on the poll tax of 1377, J. C. Russell estimated that in 1377–81, the immediate pre-plague era, there were in England 2,054 nuns to 8,564 male religious, a ratio of about one to four. This ratio changed only slightly at the Dissolution (1530–40), when the number of nuns was 1,576, of male religious 6,740. Russell comments on his figures: "The opportunities for women in religious life were not great . . . Yet the number of nuns seems amazingly small."<sup>7</sup> The estimates of R. Neville Hadcock are not very different. He suggested that the total number of male religious during the period from 1350 to 1534 ranged between nine and ten thousand. During these years the number of nuns remained fairly constant at about two thousand – a ratio of roughly one female to four and a half or five male religious.<sup>8</sup> If we were to add the large number of male secular clergy, the disparity between men and women religious would be still wider. It has recently been estimated that in Chaucer's period, given the immense variety of male forms of celibate life, "the celibate male population must have outnumbered nuns by, probably, 20 to 1 or more: say 40,000 men to fewer than 2,000 women."<sup>9</sup>



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The number of women's houses, like the number of nuns, was also small: in 1922 Eileen Power called the number 138.<sup>10</sup> Later Hadcock agreed, positing 136–37 houses during the years 1534–40, or about 16.5 percent of the total number.<sup>11</sup>

Assessment of these houses' wealth is possible only sporadically before the Dissolution, but the survey of church resources ordered in 1535, the Valor Ecclesiasticus, is revealing. Summarizing this information, John Tillotson points out that "two-thirds of all nunneries had gross incomes of less than £100 a year; whilst 39, more than a third of the total for which we have figures, enjoyed gross revenues of under £50 a year."<sup>12</sup> Tillotson's comparison of male and female Benedictine institutions' income underlines the disparity between comfortable monks and poor nuns. In the 1535 survey 68 percent of Benedictine women's houses had incomes below £100 yearly, while 4 percent had incomes over £400. By comparison, only 25 percent of male houses had incomes under £100 yearly. The more surprising information, however, comes from the other end of the scale: "More than half the male houses had revenues exceeding £400 a year; 21 had over £1,000; and the incomes of the six wealthiest exceeded £2,000 a year. Indeed these last six houses actually owned lands and rents to an annual value *in excess of all English nunneries put together*" (italics in original).<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the number of nuns at a typical women's house was not large. One authority refers to "the usual twelve nuns under a prioress."<sup>14</sup> At the Dissolution almost half had a population under ten, and all but thirteen had less than twenty members. Some female houses stood out from the rest. Power's listing of the most notable of these would still receive general assent: "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"; Dartford (Kent), the only English Dominican house for women, founded by Edward III (1327–43); and Syon, the only Bridgettine house, founded about 1415.<sup>15</sup> To these might be added the Franciscan house of Denny in Cambridgeshire, the London minoresses, and perhaps Carrow and Campsey in East Anglia, all notable for a developed spirituality, all possessed of surviving books. The correlation of wealth, size, and influence is inescapable. For the most part it is at such advantaged female houses that the record of bookowning and reading can be traced.

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### WOMEN'S LIBRARIES: A SURVEY

We might begin then by looking at evidence for religious women's libraries. All religious houses, no matter how small and poor, possessed some service books. Such a collection is illustrated by a 1450 inventory from Easebourne, Sussex, a house of Benedictine nuns which can never have had more than ten members, and in the early sixteenth century had at various times a population of six and of eight. Thus its collection of twenty-four books is an impressive one. With the exception of one French bible, however, all of the books possessed by this female house – missals, portases, antiphoners, a troparium, a book of collects, and so on – were connected with performance of the liturgy, perhaps because Easebourne shared its church with the local parish.<sup>16</sup> While we cannot underestimate the liturgy's power as an instructive force, it is extra-liturgical reading on which this inquiry will focus. Whether a female house possessed a collection of non-service books extensive enough to be termed a library must have depended upon several factors – the house's date of foundation, its wealth, its characteristic spirituality, for instance. It is not surprising, then, that the evidence for substantial collections comes from the largest and best-known women's houses.

The Barking ordinal's account of book distribution within that community on the first Monday of Lent is well known because its physical circumstances are so graphically described. (The Benedictine Rule says merely that at the opening of Lent, community members are to receive a book from the library which they must read from beginning to end.<sup>17</sup>) On the chapter house floor the Barking librarian spread a carpet and placed on it all the books from the book cupboard (the word used is singular, *armario*, which might signify "chest" as well as book-case or cupboard).<sup>18</sup> She then read each nun's name aloud, together with the name of her borrowed book from the previous year and, if the sister had finished the book she placed it on the carpet with the others.<sup>19</sup> It has not been previously noted that since the ordinal says the Barking community numbered about fifty in these first years of the fifteenth century, the abbey must have had a book collection at least that large.<sup>20</sup>

Among Barking's obedientiaries, besides a librarian, were two *circuitrices*, also specified by the Rule. Dame Laurentia McLachlan says

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that their duties were “to go about (*circumeant*) the monastery at times appointed for reading and see that all were engaged in that duty.”<sup>21</sup> They were warned neither to spare a defaulter nor to accuse any without just cause.

Another text which points both to the existence of a library and to the care of books in a female house has recently been published:

Ore dunke soit eschewe of ech and of alle, and nameliche of these younge ladies. That thei be nougt negligent for to leue here bokes to hem assigned, behynde hem in the quer, neyther in cloystre; nether leue here bokes open other vnclosed, ne withoute kepinge, neither kitte out of no book leef, ne quaier, neyther write therinne; neyther put out withoute leue, neyther lene no book out of the place, ho so vnwitinge or [*sic*] his negligence or mys gouernaunce lest or alieneth. Bote al so clene and enter that thei ben kept, and in same numbre and in the same stat, or in bettre, yif it may, that thei be yolde vp agen into the librarie, as thei were afore in yer resseyued. Yif there is eny agens these poyns ~~that~~ had trespassed, of that he be *in* chapitele changed [*sic*] and corrected.<sup>22</sup>

The piece is appended to a Middle English translation of the Benedictine rule for nuns, made from French (Washington D.C., Library of Congress MS Faye-Bond 4). Its language locates it in Essex, near Hatfield Broad Oak, the home of a Benedictine male house. The verse colophon says its scribe was a Benedictine, male or female, commissioned by a nun of the same order who might have been Abbess Sibyl de Felton of Barking (1394–1419) or the unknown prioress of the Essex house of Castle Hedingham, a sister foundation to Hatfield. A marginal drawing of a nun’s head and armorial, perhaps Lucy de Vere, Hedingham’s foundress, together with a bird carrying another shield in its beak, provide tantalizing clues to the manuscript’s provenance (Figure 3).<sup>23</sup>

Latin and French versions of these strictures on the care of books are found in the Barking ordinal also, though it seems that this English version is not derived from those appearances.<sup>24</sup> Like the ordinal, however, this manuscript seems to be the product of a female superior’s wish to make texts of governance available to her nuns – in English, rather than in the ordinal’s Latin or French. What is most significant about the “care of books” text is its incorporation in two manuscripts written especially for a female house or houses, contexts in which strictures on care of

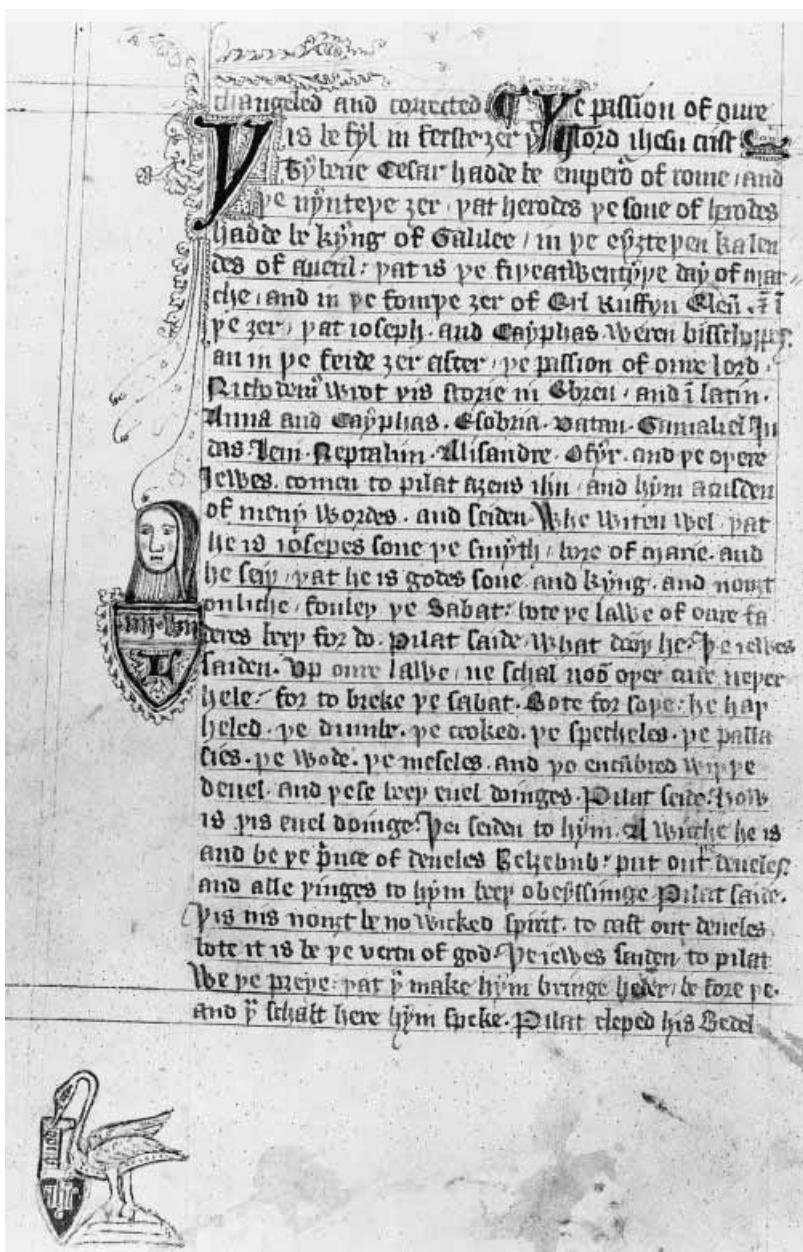


Figure 3 Marginal drawing of a nun, from Washington D.C., Library of Congress ms Faye-Bond 4, which includes a Middle English translation of the Benedictine rule for women. The drawing is probably intended to represent the house's founder or the translation's commissioner. The figure of a bird carrying a scroll inscribed "quod" points to the scribe's identity.

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books were thought appropriate. It seems unlikely, in fact, that these two efforts to supply documents of rule for a female community could have proceeded unknown to each other, since they were so closely joined in time and place. Ms Faye-Bond 4 may also be from Barking, but if it is not, we might speculate about the loan of manuscript exemplars between two female Essex houses, Barking and Hedingham.

At Syon, too, we can be confident that a women's library existed, with its own librarian, in addition to the brothers' great collection of over 1,400 volumes. A 1482 contract made by Syon's abbess with a bookbinder, Thomas Baille, refers to "ye kepar of ye brethrenes librarie [and] ye kepar of oure ye sistrenes librarie."<sup>25</sup> To the explicit mention of Barking's librarian at the beginning of the fifteenth century and Syon's at the century's end we may add the visitation account of St. Mary's Winchester in 1501, where librarian Elia Pitte is named.<sup>26</sup>

Additional evidence for nuns' libraries comes from the *Registrum Angliae*, a union catalogue of monastic books in England, Scotland, and Wales which the Oxford Franciscans compiled on the basis of site visits in the early fourteenth century.<sup>27</sup> For St. Mary Winchester the *Registrum* reports a library of thirty-nine titles. The other Hampshire female houses of Wherwell and Romsey have been included in the survey by being assigned identifying numbers – hence presumably the compilers understood them to possess libraries – but were never reported.

So far evidence of reading has come from sources outside of the books. By contrast Neil Ker's recuperative work and its continuation by Andrew Watson bring together the surviving monastic books themselves as witnesses to their ownership.<sup>28</sup> In identifying extant books as monastic holdings, this research makes it possible to speak with some certainty about particular libraries.

Internal evidence of an institutional collection takes two forms: pressmarks and *ex libris* inscriptions. Pressmarks, the signs of a book's place among other books, provide the volume's class and its shelf letter. They seem not to have been in general use until the fourteenth century.<sup>29</sup> David Bell notes three examples in nuns' books, one from Barking (B. 3) and two from Campsey (O.E. 94; D.D. 141).<sup>30</sup> To these may be added another Campsey book, which carries the notation C 32 – perhaps a

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pressmark – at the top of the second folio in an early sixteenth-century hand (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College ms 268).

Bell has found evidence of *ex libris* inscriptions in fifteen volumes from nuns' houses.<sup>31</sup> Most are fifteenth-century notations, except for two thirteenth-century examples from Barking and two fourteenth-century ones, from Campsey and Nuneaton. Again, Campsey is distinctive: Ker noted the presence of "a regular form in French, 'Cest livre est a covent de Campisse'" <sup>32</sup>; it occurs in three books. The remaining inscriptions are one-of-a-kind, though some examples look like house formulae: for instance, "Hic liber constat religiosis sororibus de Deptford [Dartford]" in a chronicle, or "Istud Psalterium pertinet domui de Carehowe [Carrow]." <sup>33</sup>

Another kind of physical evidence is found in an early fifteenth-century manuscript almost certainly from Wilton (Wilts.), where a short list of books, about half of them liturgical, has been entered on the verso of the last page. Of the thirty-six items, seventeen are service books, though the list begins with "Flos Bartholomei," "Isodorus" and "Moralium Gregorii" and ends with "v Redyng bokys for the frayter" and six "bokys of henglys." The list's editors note that at this time the number of Wilton's nuns was about forty (comparable to Barking's approximately fifty at the same period), but caution that what appears to be a "small communal collection" cannot be assumed to represent the entire library. <sup>34</sup>

Finally, some of the great female houses probably employed scribes. A. I. Doyle has pointed out that Winchester College accounts reveal the presence of a scribe from St. Mary's Abbey (Nunaminster) "where he must have worked for the nuns, copying books between 1398–9 and 1423–4." <sup>35</sup>

### SURVIVING NUNS' BOOKS

At this point we must offer some idea of these books' numbers. Ker's and Watson's lists show a residue almost startlingly small. <sup>36</sup> In their tabulations, surviving books owned by nuns total 138. <sup>37</sup> Bell's additions, which utilize Christopher de Hamel's recent work on Syon, have raised this total to 161. <sup>38</sup> The number of survivors is certainly higher than this.

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For instance, in listing Syon's books Bell categorizes twelve as belonging either to the sisters or the brothers; had he accepted de Hamel's classification, the majority of these would have been assigned to Syon nuns. Similarly, Ker decided not to include in his list the business books of a house – cartularies, rentals, surveys – and did so only when other material, such as chronicles, formed part of the volume. Bell notes that Ker includes only one female charter (from Godstow). Actually, as Bell's work on G. R. C. Davis's list of cartularies shows, thirty-two business documents survive for female houses.<sup>39</sup> Of this number Bell includes only three in his own list: had they all been included the total number of nuns' volumes would be 190. To this number another twenty-three newly identified nuns' books may be added (see Appendix I, which lists six possible volumes as well), making the total 213–19. In the main, women's houses owned service books, theological and devotional texts, and business books. No doubt discoveries of more religious women's books will continue to be made, particularly as female names in surviving books are identified as belonging to nuns.

Of the female library collections Syon holds pride of place. Christopher de Hamel lists a total of forty-six manuscripts identified either as coming from the women's library (nine) or as representing women's liturgical or semi-liturgical use (thirty-seven).<sup>40</sup> To these can be added the eleven printed books in Ker and Watson which are identified as female-owned (all bear Syon women's names) for a total of fifty-seven. Bell's tabulation of Syon's printed books and manuscripts totals forty-eight; if the twelve books which he labels as either sisters' or brothers' were added, his count of Syon women's books would be sixty – not very different from the alternative total of fifty-seven.<sup>41</sup> With the additional eight volumes from Syon which are listed in Appendix I, the number of surviving women's books from this house would be either sixty-five or sixty-eight (not counting fragments) – just under a third of all the nuns' books which survive.

Other institutions have not received such intense scrutiny. Bell's work altered Ker and Watson's totals for other female houses by only one or two volumes, and my count is likewise close to Bell's. At present, including the books listed in Appendix I, Barking stands second with fifteen volumes (not counting the problematic list of William Pownsett's books). Dartford comes next with eleven books, Shaftesbury and

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Amesbury with seven each, the London minoresses with six, St. Mary Winchester and Campsey with five, Tarrant Keynston and Wherwell with four.<sup>42</sup> Other than that the total is made up of ones and twos.

But these rare objects which have survived both the vicissitudes of their own history and the rigorous screening imposed by bibliographers comprise only a nucleus. Other survivors have not met Ker's and Watson's criteria, yet their association with women's houses is often convincing. The unique manuscript of Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, for instance, reports in its colophon that it was written in Cambridge and given "onto this holy place of nunnys."<sup>43</sup> The house may be Denny, the Franciscan foundation seven miles northeast of Cambridge, as A. I. Doyle suggested,<sup>44</sup> or another nearby female house, but in the absence of more certain connection with a particular institution, London, British Library MS Arundel 327 does not appear in Ker-Watson or Bell.

Around this core of surviving books whose claims are more or less compelling, another sort of evidence accrues, the record of lost books. In the inventories from female religious houses, made at the Dissolution in the 1530s we might hope to find the record of additional volumes, but for the most part these lists reveal only collections of service books.<sup>45</sup> Minster in Sheppey (Kent), an ancient and wealthy house founded in 675 by St. Sexburga, the niece of St. Hilda, constitutes an exception. Here commissioners found eight service books with silver clasps in the church, seven books in the vestry, variously termed "goodly" and "good," "an olde presse full of old bokes of no valem" in the lady chapel, and a book of saints' lives in the parlor.<sup>46</sup>

Christopher de Hamel's researches have shown that at the Dissolution the Syon nuns took a great many books with them when a part of the community went abroad. The 1495 *Vitas patrum* owned by Dartford's Katherine Efflyn carries a Dutch inscription, indicating that she likewise took it abroad with her in 1559, but evidence of a larger initiative remains to be discovered. It is possible that less comprehensive efforts to save portions of a collection, where one existed in the larger women's houses, may have been mounted – particularly where small groups of religious women continued to live in common and to maintain their religious rule. The record of women who lived together after the Dissolution is beginning to be investigated, and the accounts



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of several pairs of friends have been recovered. Perhaps the best-known is Elizabeth Thorne of Swine who left her house in Hull to her “well-beloved in Christ,” fellow nun Elisabeth Patrike.<sup>47</sup> Larger groups who remained together include, among others, Elizabeth Throckmorton and several relatives from Denny who lived at the Throckmortons’ manor, Coughton Court; Jane Kyppax, prioress of Kirklees who retired to a house in Mirfield with four of her nuns; a group of Dartford nuns including Agnes Roper and Elizabeth Cressener who lived at Sutton at Hone, two and a half miles from Dartford; the several groups from Syon which continued to live together in various English locations when others went abroad; and less surely, since the only evidence is bequests to former sisters, Dorothy Barley with three older nuns of Barking and Elizabeth Shelley, last abbess of Nunnaminster, who left gifts to seven former nuns.<sup>48</sup>

THE CONTENT OF NUNS’ LIBRARIES

The Dissolution, however, marks a formal end to religious women’s institutional book collections. Not surprisingly, the nature of those collections changed over time. Is it possible to assess their character? If we look at the book bequests made to nunneries in the century and a half between 1349 and 1501, we can see in this series of twenty-nine gifts a number of significant connections between lay and religious women, and can trace some developments in their shared reading.<sup>49</sup>

Most surprising is the increase in books bequeathed during this hundred and fifty years. Such gifts to nunneries are more than twice as frequent in the fifteenth century as in the fourteenth (twenty gifts vs. nine), reflecting a general growth in literacy affecting both givers and receivers. Even more telling is the alteration, around 1400, in the kind of book bequeathed. In the earliest nunnery bequest, 1349, books are included as an element in church furnishings; their significance is liturgical. In that year William de Thorneye, a London pepperer, gave to St Helen’s Bishopsgate a hanging cup for the host and a silver–gilt chalice, plus his portifory and psalter.<sup>50</sup> In this context the psalter seems intended for liturgical use, though psalters could be used both for divine service and for private reading and thus could serve either the institution or the individual. With one exception, a breviary, the next five gifts were

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psalters, in 1374, 1376, 1391, 1392, and 1398.<sup>51</sup> Since four of these five gifts were designated for an individual (not 1376), they should probably be counted as personal books (though two of them were given to heads of houses). Psalters are thus the most characteristic fourteenth-century book bequest and, we might conclude, the most characteristic form of female reading at that time.<sup>52</sup>

In the first half of the fifteenth century some older patterns continue: a liturgical book bequest in 1412,<sup>53</sup> a psalter given to a prioress in 1431.<sup>54</sup> But along with such bequests, in 1415 one testator left an English *Prick of Conscience* and two books of hours (the most popular book of the fifteenth century),<sup>55</sup> and halfway through the century in 1448 Agnes Stapilton's five vernacular books signal forcefully the arrival of an audience for English devotional works – an audience composed of nuns and laywomen, as her will makes clear. The four Yorkshire female houses in her will, Arthington, Esholt, Nun Monkton, and Sinningthwaite, lay just west of the city and must have provided a network of friends and peers for this York widow, and within that network she left her copies of the *Prick of Conscience*, *Chastising of God's Children*, a book called *Vices and Virtues*, and a text of Bonaventure.<sup>56</sup>

With the Stapilton collection of 1448 we might compare another collection, the books given in 1399 by Duchess of Gloucester Eleanor de Bohun to her daughter Isabel at the London minoresses, where the duchess was living.<sup>57</sup> Recorded just half a century apart and designated for religious women, each collection might be considered typical of its owner's class and period. The duchess' *milieu* was both elevated and literary. Her mother Joan, countess of Hereford, had commissioned Hoccleve's "Complaint of the Virgin," and at her death Henry V spent £73 for books and other things from her estate.<sup>58</sup> Eleanor's father, Humphrey de Bohun, earl of Hereford, and her sister Mary de Bohun, have been associated with the production of several illuminated books, and one of Eleanor's own commissions, a psalter-hours made between 1382 and 1396 or 1397, survives.<sup>59</sup> She was married to the most notable bookowner of the age, Thomas of Woodstock,<sup>60</sup> and her own will mentions fourteen books, both secular and religious; most intriguing of these for our purposes is the group directed to her Franciscan daughter.

The collection appears to be intended for an institutional library, and in particular, to meet the needs of a community superior – and

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indeed Isabel did later become abbess of the minoresses.<sup>61</sup> It includes a Bible; a book of decretals (Bell calls it “the only book of canon law so far traced to a nunnery”)<sup>62</sup>; a historical work (“livre de meistre histoires”); *Vitas Patrum*; “les pastorelx Seint Gregoire” which Bell identifies as Gregory the Great’s *Regula Pastoralis*; and two presumably Latin psalters glossed in French. Institutional concerns dominate here (canon law; history, a traditional preserve of monastic libraries; Gregory’s work, written for those holding pastoral office and advising on the treatment of subordinates; the *Vitas Patrum*, probably for refectory reading), while the fashion for psalters looks backward rather than forward and the vernacular is French.

Half a century later in Agnes Stapilton’s collection only one of the five vernacular books was French (an unspecified gift to Denny). Her four English books represent a mix of moral and instructional emphasis which does not appear in the duchess’ collection. The duchess’ books are thoroughly traditional choices for a monastic library, male or female; they might as easily have been bequeathed in the twelfth century. Further, their aristocratic provenance is revealed in their usefulness for a female administrator. Agnes Stapilton’s books, on the other hand, in their shift to a different vernacular – English instead of French – and in their focus on personal devotion, represent the rising interests of a different group of women.<sup>63</sup> Stapilton, whose origins were gentry rather than aristocratic, chose to give to the nuns *she* knew, not the fruits of the patristic tradition (St. Gregory the Great; *Vitas Patrum*), but newer meditative and ethical works. Her gifts are books which originated in the last hundred years (*Prick* c. 1350; *Vices and Virtues* c. 1375; *Chastising* 1382–1408; Love’s *Mirror* c. 1410). Her mid-fifteenth-century will illustrates the successful dissemination of work produced in the last half of the fourteenth century.

The Stapilton will has been much cited – because of its total of ten books, because of the books’ Englishness, because of the connections it makes with other women. Centrally, however, it makes visible a new kind of reading. Before Stapilton, books bequeathed to nunneries were primarily for liturgical use. After, they were almost entirely for personal use – and almost entirely English.

In the latter half of the fifteenth century, the book gifts which followed Stapilton’s were similar to hers. Here is the list of the bequests which

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women's religious houses received between 1451 and 1501. Taken in sequence, the books are: a primer (book of hours) and *The Chastising of God's Children* (1451);<sup>64</sup> Rolle's *English Psalter* (1467);<sup>65</sup> the *Pater Noster* with other things (1479);<sup>66</sup> a primer, *Doctrine of the Heart*, and an English book of St. Bridget (1481);<sup>67</sup> an English life of Our Lord (perhaps Love's *Mirror*) and an English life of St. Katherine (1485/86);<sup>68</sup> Love's *Mirror* with a text of Hilton's (perhaps *Mixed Life*) and St. Bridget's *Revelations* (1495);<sup>69</sup> the *Legenda Aurea* in English (1501).<sup>70</sup>

Except for the *Legenda Aurea*, these are texts either newly composed or newly translated. Rolle's *English Psalter* is the earliest, written near the end of his life around 1348. Hilton's *Mixed Life* and the *Chastising* are probably products of the 1380s, though *Chastising's* editors would allow a date as late as 1408. The rest, however, are firmly fifteenth-century work. Love's *Mirror* was submitted for Arundel's approval, as one of its manuscripts says, about 1410, and the *Pater Noster* was likewise written in the early fifteenth century. St. Bridget's *Revelations*, though begun in the 1340s, were not translated until perhaps 1410–20, the date of the earliest surviving English manuscript. Probably the latest of these bequests was the *Doctrine of the Heart*, composed in Latin in the middle of the thirteenth century but not translated into English, to judge by its surviving manuscripts, until 1400–50.

Transmission of these new works, in the fifty years after Agnes Stapilton's signal bequest, was brisk. A gap of about 120 years exists between the date that Rolle wrote his *English Psalter* (c. 1348) and the date it was bequeathed (1467), but in the next four nunnery bequests only forty to seventy-five years elapse between the time of composition and the time of bequest. In other words, these relatively new works were being circulated fairly rapidly. *Chastising*, for instance, composed between 1382 and 1408, was bequeathed in 1451, a span of forty-three to sixty-eight years. Similar figures can be cited for the *Pater Noster* (c. seventy years), Love's *Mirror* (c. seventy-five years), and *Doctrine* (c. fifty-five years). Abbess Horwode of the London Minoresses, with whose bequest we began, is entirely typical; she bought her Hilton miscellany about seventy years after its author died.

In summary: the book gifts to women's houses between 1349 and 1501 show a doubling in the number of books bequeathed, which no doubt reflects the growth of general literacy. The kind of reading alters,

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notably by the mid-fifteenth century, from liturgical to devotional. The two collections, the duchess of Gloucester's and Agnes Stapilton's, given fifty years apart, illustrate the difference between books for consultation by a religious superior, (embodying an earlier notion of a useful library for a female house), and books for common reading (implying a model of reading more widespread and more directed toward personal formation). Finally, in the fifteenth century, the books bequeathed were authored recently, for the most part within the last hundred years, while the duchess of Gloucester's little library drew on the fathers, canonists, and historians of ecclesiastical tradition.

The record of book gifts to nuns during these years, despite its slender and partial quality, is valuable because it tracks so closely reading evidence from elsewhere. Through the history of religious womens' libraries, of books "to the Vse off þe Systerres," as the minoress inscription says, we can view the most powerful currents in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century book use.

TRANSMISSION OF BOOKS

What shape did women's reading networks assume? Here we will merely gesture toward several kinds of exchange which in the following chapters will receive fuller illustration. The jottings in surviving nuns' books can provide a taxonomy for book transmission: between female houses, within a house, and outside the house among nuns and laywomen. Evidence of intellectual exchange between female houses is so far relatively rare: A. I. Doyle's work on manuscripts belonging to Barking and Dartford provides the paradigm in its suggestion of manuscript transmission between these houses, which may have involved a laywoman with relatives at both places.<sup>71</sup> More recently V. M. O'Mara has pointed out ways in which a devotional miscellany made probably for Carrow was influenced by St. Bridget's *Revelations* and hence, most likely, by Syon.<sup>72</sup>

Currently, the most telling piece of evidence for intellectual and spiritual connection between womens' institutions is a letter discovered by Doyle.<sup>73</sup> Its hand is Thomas Betson's, the Syon brothers' librarian in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The letter speaks of (presumably) Syon's dissemination of spiritual writings to another

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female house. Addressed to “Welbiloued Susturs in our lord ihesu crist,” it continues: “knowe ye that of such goostly writynges as our susturs haue with vs we send you *part* Consailing and willyng you for encesse of oure mede to lete thies be *common* emong you & yif copy of them to other of religion that dwell nygh you.” These lines imply that such circulation of texts to other houses may have been common practice. Stronger evidence of shared reading will depend upon future editing work, which can discover patterns of transmission through comparison of textual relationships. Equally important will be a firmer sense of which houses were connected and how: by ties of blood shared among fellow religious, by membership in the same order such as Fontevrault or the Franciscans, or even by geography. The important female houses of Shaftesbury, Romsey, Winchester, Wherwell, Amesbury, and Wilton, for instance, all stood with a radius of twenty miles.<sup>74</sup>

Circulation of reading material among members of the same community, whether male or female, seems to have been developing as part of monastic culture from the fifteenth century on. Although no religious rule provides for such horizontal exchange, the books themselves testify to this practice.<sup>75</sup> Since private property was forbidden by all monastic rules, meticulous individuals or houses recorded the consent of the institutional superior when books were exchanged. The London minoresses, for instance, seem to have had a tradition of such precise assignment, since four of their five extant books have such entries.

Though examples survive of what appear to be gifts from one contemporary nun to another, some of the books which circulated within a female house, as at male houses, must have passed from an older religious to a younger when the senior member died. “At St. Augustine’s abbey [Canterbury] the customary specifically stated that . . . it was the precentor’s duty to take such books and to write the dead monk’s name in them before bearing them off to the library.”<sup>76</sup> So the 1493 *Chastising of God’s Children* carries two Syon names on f. 3, Edith Morepath and Katherine Palmer. The former died in 1536, the latter in 1576.<sup>77</sup> Re-use of such books, at once the property of the community and yet strongly individualized by the previous owner’s name, must have contributed to the formation of collective identity, and certainly to the sense of the individual as part of a collective history – a position which for women was relatively rare. The strength of such ties is nowhere clearer than in

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a brief inscription written in the back of a Sarum *horae* from Dartford. It asks for prayers for the soul of sister Alice Brainthwaite “who gave us this book” (*qui dedit nobis istum librum*).<sup>78</sup> The informality of the mutual “us,” chosen here in preference to a more formal third-person reference (“gave to the monastery of Dartford”) acknowledges the bonds of religious community with affecting simplicity.

The day of religious profession often brought book gifts. Enough examples survive to consider such books a recognizable class. The book of hours which Elizabeth Edward’s parents gave her on this occasion is personalized first by Syon’s insignia and second by her initial: at the foot of the donation inscription the five wounds emblem, represented by four small squares arranged around a fifth central square, appears above a lower-case *e*.<sup>79</sup> Other books carry this symbol as well: in the JRUL copy of de Worde’s 1507 *Deyenge Creature*, originally part of a composite volume, next to the colophon has been drawn a majuscule “S” surrounded by four dots and a comma, representing the side wound. The Lambeth Palace copy of the 1530 *Mirrore of Our Lady* bears the same symbol written in ink, accompanied by two initials, on the binding of the lower cover.<sup>80</sup>

Though service books were perhaps given most frequently, other spiritual texts were also presented. James Grenehalgh’s well-known profession-day gift, an annotated copy of the printed *Scale of Perfection* made to Syon’s Joan Sewell, in its complex fullness was intended to support a lifetime of meditative reading. The profession ceremony itself could become the material for such meditation. The anonymous author of Oxford, Bodley Ms Additional A 42, writing to Amesbury nuns identified only as Mary and Anne, refers to “your good and relygyouse desyres to haue hadde sum goostly *comforte* & som *maner* off instructyon of me. nowe att y<sup>e</sup> tyme of your professyon: And specyally a pon the wordes of the same. & the substancyall.”<sup>81</sup> Since around 1516 Bishop Richard Fox likewise provided his Hampshire nuns with his English commentary on the Latin profession rite, it appears that meditation on the *ordo professorum* was regarded as an important element in formation.<sup>82</sup>

The books which laywomen gave to nuns often demonstrate the benefits which wealth could confer on female houses. The countess of Oxford’s large French compilation of devotional texts presented to

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Barking in 1474 or 1477<sup>83</sup> and Agnes Ratcliffe's gift to Marrick of an illustrated English translation of Deguileville's *Pelérinage de l'Ame*<sup>84</sup> are such grand gifts. Some of these books might have been intended as mortuaries, gifts from a decedent to a religious house in partial recompense for obligations. The cartulary of Marham, a Norfolk women's house, contains a list of sixteen people who died in the house or its jurisdiction between 1401 and 1453. One of them, Sir John Champeney, a priest who lived in the abbey, left as his mortuary a book which was sold for eight marks, a large sum.<sup>85</sup> These gift books, however, also illustrate the power of local obligation. The interest in Barking shown by several generations of de Vere women was at least partly due to their roots in Essex at their seat of Castle Hedingham, while Agnes Ratcliffe was born a Scrope, a member of a family which regularly patronized its Yorkshire institutions.<sup>86</sup>

Such gifts bear a variety of other messages as well. For instance in Beatrice Cornburgh's life-gift of her psalter to Dame Grace Centurio, and then "unto what syster of the meneres that it shall plese the seme grace to gyf it," the inscription asks the community "to pray *perpetually* for the sawles named in this present Sawter."<sup>87</sup> The gift thus witnesses the familiar use of books as counters in spiritual exchange. It also gives evidence of a spirituality shared between lay and religious women. And, of course, the psalter constitutes a personal remembrance to a friend. Grace in her turn would be remembered and prayed for by the woman to whom she gave Beatrice's book, as the gift passed from person to person within the confines of an exclusively female world.<sup>88</sup>

The occasions on which books passed outside institutional walls, from nuns to laywomen, must have been fewer. What is in fact one of the very few presentation inscriptions written by a nun can, however, be seen in a printed copy of William Bonde's 1526 *Pylgrimage of Perfection*: "of your charyte I pray you to pray for dame Iohan Spycer in syon" (Figure 4).<sup>89</sup> Since Bonde was a monk of Syon, perhaps copies of the *Pygrimage* had been ordered for members of the community or even as gifts to those outside. The book which Elizabeth Hull, abbess of Mallington, gave to the infant Margaret Neville at the latter's 1520 baptism yields more information about local ties and local tensions. The gift must have been to some extent a political one since the child's father,





of your charity I pray you to pray  
for Anne Jobu. Spycer in syon

Figure 4 Joan Spycer's gift inscription. The signature of this nun of Syon is found in the British Library copy of Syon author William Bonde's *Pylgrimage of Perfection*, 1526 (STC 3277, BL G 11740 [A6v]).

Sir Thomas Neville, was patron of Mereworth, the church where the baptism took place and he displayed a continuing interest in Malling, at the Dissolution attempting to buy the abbey.<sup>90</sup>

Book gifts by nuns became more visible at the Dissolution as institutional collections were dispersed. Sometime in the 1540s the former Barking nun Margaret Scrope gave to Agnes Gowldeuell, a gentlewoman of her sister's household, a copy of Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Life of Christ* which had belonged to Abbess Sibyl de Felton (d. 1419).<sup>91</sup> Another Barking book was for a time in female hands. In the Barking ordinal "the name Dorothy Broke has been written

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in a sixteenth-century hand. [She] was the wife of a lawyer, Thomas Broke, who appears on an account roll of the abbey just before the Dissolution.”<sup>92</sup> In 1542, the *Orchard of Syon* which had been owned by Syon nun Elizabeth Strickland was given by her brother-in-law and executor Sir Richard Ashton to his second wife.<sup>93</sup> His first wife had been Elizabeth Strickland's sister, and like other nuns after the Dissolution Elizabeth apparently left Syon to live with her sister and brother-in-law. That the book was given to Ashton's second wife underlines the *Orchard's* interest as a text for women, whether religious or lay. Finally the 1493 printed copy of the *Chastising of God's Children* which bears the names of Syon's Edith Morepath and Katherine Palmer, mentioned above, is inscribed in a later hand “Dorothe Abington.” This owner was perhaps the sister of Thomas Habington of Hindlip (Worcs.). A conspirator in the Babington plot, Habington made Hindlip a center for recusancy from the 1570s.<sup>94</sup> At the end of the sixteenth century, the decade in which the house was built, ownership of the *Chastising* would have represented the family's support of the old religion and its devotions.

Several of these books which changed hands at the Dissolution, the *Mirror*, the *Orchard*, and the *Chastising*, had been widely owned and read by women since the fifteenth century, and their movement now from their former religious owners to secular women would simply have continued a longstanding pattern of book exchange. To some extent also the acquisition of these books may suggest a continuing attachment on the part of women to older forms of female life, now changing radically or passing from existence.

Against this background – a survey of religious women's houses, their libraries, their surviving books, and their networks of exchange – the following narratives of individual women readers are presented. The connections among these women, who were both religious and lay, and the practices through which they obtained, used, and exchanged books, will illustrate in a more particular way the overview offered here.