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Introduction

Corinne Saunders and Diane Watt

Named women authors in the medieval period may seem to the modern reader disappointingly few, remarkable exceptions that break the rule of a firmly male literary culture. In England, they comprise Marie de France in the twelfth century and Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe more than two centuries later. Yet female authorship extends far beyond these names. To English names we might add the Continental women whose writings were widely circulated, adapted, or translated, in particular Christine de Pizan in the fifteenth century, but also, although the early fourteenth-century Middle English version did not carry her name, Marguerite Porete, burnt at the stake for heresy in 1310 for the beliefs presented in her radical treatise *Mirror of Simple Souls* (*c.* 1300), St Catherine of Siena, whose *Dialogue* was translated into Middle English in the mid-fourteenth century, St Bridget of Sweden, whose revelations were translated in the 1340s, and the twelfth-century female physician Trota of Salerno, to whom a group of treatises on women's medicine widely circulated in England and the Continent was attributed. Other names hover on the margins: the anonymous 'Nun of Barking', the twelfth-century author of an Anglo-Norman life of Edward the Confessor, and Clemence of Barking, who translated the life of St Catherine of Alexandria (perhaps the same woman); Juliana Berners (*fl.* 1460), thought by some to have been the prioress of Sopwell Abbey, to whom *The Book of Hawking, Hunting, and Blasing of Arms*, also known as *The Boke of St Albans*, a collection of prose and verse treatises, is attributed; and Eleanor Hull, who translated a series of devotional works into English in the fifteenth century, also at Sopwell. The network grows larger still when letter writers such as the Paston women, writing in the second half of the fifteenth century, are added. Even this list, by no means comprehensive, gives some indication of the range of works by or attributed to women that were in circulation in England in the later Middle Ages.

As scholarship over the last three decades has also shown, modern notions of authorship are often reductive. Women's writings may be collaborative in

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different ways: through amanuenses, through translation and adaptation, but also through women's historical and literary relationships with the men who wrote their lives, as, for example, in the cases of Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Acre, the confessor and follower of Mary d'Oignies (*c.* 1170–1213) and author of her Latin life, and of the anonymous twelfth-century monk of St Albans (most likely Robert de Gorron, monk and subsequently abbot of St Albans),[1] whose *Life of Christina of Markyate* so vividly indicates personal knowledge of her. Marguerite Porete was closely associated with the German theologian and mystic Meister Eckhardt (*c.* 1260–*c.* 1328), celebrated for his work with and influenced by pious lay groups such as the beguines, communities of women in cities of northern Europe who adopted religious lives without entering established orders, and who included, as well as Porete, the thirteenth-century visionary poets Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Brabant.[2] And in a strikingly collaborative female relationship, Christine de Pizan's *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc* (1429) is not only addressed to but in part shapes the influence and positive reception of Joan through its powerful, hagiographic presentation of her.[3]

Women's names, then, ripple out, connecting with others and reaching far across time and place. Perhaps most crucially, however, women's literary culture includes other intersecting and powerful networks: women are not only writers and collaborators in writing, but also patrons, readers, and subjects of texts. Their networks extend from Britain to the Continent and beyond. Evidence concerning women reading must be pieced together from wills and other historical records, and from literary references: it is not plentiful, but it is revealing of an active literary culture which included different communities of readers and different kinds of reading – silent and aloud, individual and to group audiences, meditative and for entertainment. As D. H. Green emphasises, despite the injunction of St Paul against the education of women and their exclusion from the medieval universities, several theologians, including in the fifth century St Jerome, not generally known for his sympathetic views of women, and, in the thirteenth century, Vincent of Beauvais, encouraged women reading, and hence the education of young women. By the fifteenth century, the French nobleman Geoffroy de la Tour Landry could strongly criticise resistance to teaching women to read. Green stresses the active models of both the Virgin and St Anne, often depicted as reading, and offering influential models for both religious and lay aristocratic women. Green emphasises crucial developments in the course of the Middle Ages: 'the extension of literacy from religious life to the lay world, where it could also be practised by men, but more commonly by women', and 'the

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domestication of literacy, its expansion from the monastery to the household, particularly in the education of the young in reading and the laywoman's use of prayer books and devotional reading matter in the home as well as in church'. He also emphasises the promotion of the vernacular, and hence of books in the vernacular, connected with the rise of women readers.[4]

Many of the essays in this volume discuss the sophisticated engagement of women in different kinds of religious community with books and reading, including with French and Latin as well as English books. The abbeys of Barking (founded in the seventh century by St Erkenwald; a Benedictine foundation from the tenth century) and later Syon, the Birgittine house founded in 1415, provide celebrated examples where women read and translated works from Latin into the vernaculars of Anglo-Norman and then English. Lay women also might be active and learned readers. Green offers examples of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century women such as Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, and Anne Stafford, Countess of Huntingdon, reading and studying in their chambers, but also reading to others or arranging public readings.[5] Felicity Riddy explores a pattern of spiritual teaching among women through her analysis of examples such as that of Margaret Sylemon, Prioress of Nuneaton (1367–86), whose copy of Robert Grossesteste's *Château d'amour*, left by her to the priory, is described in her will as owned both by her and her pupils, 'et discipulas suas'. If nunneries formed 'reading communities, their members teaching one another, sharing books and discussing them together', so too may lay groups of women have formed informal reading networks.[6] The household records of aristocratic vowesses such as Cecily, Duchess of York, mother of Edward IV, describe the reading of holy works at dinner, emulating, as with Margaret Beaufort, the practices of nunneries.

Devotional books were owned by women, bequeathed, and exchanged between religious communities and by laywomen.[7] Riddy offers an extended series of examples of donations and bequests of devotional works from the late thirteenth to the sixteenth century. They include bequests to priories and to individual nuns, as well as to laywomen. Carol Meale teases out a suggestive series of associations of holy books with women in late medieval England, beginning with an image of the seal of Margaret, Lady Hungerford and Botreaux (1462–78), which depicts a kneeling woman looking down at a book: Margaret bequeathed her mass books and other holy books, including to her granddaughter her matins book, while her father-in-law left to her a French book of saints' lives. Lady Margaret la Zouche left her 'best Primer' to her granddaughter

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in 1449, and, similarly, Anne Harding, wife of John Lord Scrope of Bolton, left her primer to her goddaughter in 1498. Not all bequests were made by gentry and aristocracy. Beatrice Milneth, the widow of a wealthy merchant, for instance, left her sister Anne Burgh an impressive bequest of religious books in 1448, including a French gospel of Nicodemus. Meale offers a variety of further examples of bequests in late medieval England.[8]

The active engagement of women with secular writing is clear both through the evidence of the texts themselves and through extra-textual records. Romances repeatedly refer to ladies reading books, both devotional and secular, and reading and writing letters; Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* famously describes one of Criseyde's ladies reading the *Siege of Thebes* aloud to her (II.82–4), as well as the exchange of letters between Troilus and Criseyde. While wills and other records most often mention devotional books, such as psalters and books of hours, the work of Meale and others has demonstrated that they included many other categories. In the late fourteenth century, Eleanor de Bohun left a significant library to her children which, as well as devotional works, included chronicles, Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*, and 'the Bohun ancestral romance of the "chivaler a cigne"' (the knight of the swan).[9] Alice Chaucer's estate papers record that a series of manuscript books was taken from her castle in Suffolk to her home in Oxfordshire in 1466, which included, as well as holy books, Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* and a French romance. Meale suggests that the arms of Joan Neville (d. 1462) on Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* with those of her husband may imply that she acquired it. The evidence of surviving wills, like the works themselves, suggests that Arthurian romances were especially popular among women readers. As well as the numerous romances, spanning classical, French, and Arthurian subject matter, owned in the fourteenth century by Isabella of France, wife of Edward II, Meale offers a range of other late medieval English examples, including in particular of the romances of Lancelot and Tristan. Isabel, Duchess of York, for instance, left a Lancelot romance to her son at the end of the fourteenth century, while a Lancelot was left to Isabella Eure, member of a northern gentry family, in 1435 by the spiritual chancellor of the bishop of Durham. Elizabeth la Zouche left copies of both romances to her husband in 1380, and Margaret Courtenay, Countess of Devon, left in her will of 1390/1 romances of Tristan, Merlin, and Arthur of Britain to her two daughters and another woman respectively. In the fifteenth century, Elizabeth of York signed a manuscript previously belonging to Richard III and containing part of the prose romance of Tristan, while a copy of the romance of Tristan was left to Joan Beaufort, Countess

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of Westmoreland (d. 1440), by her brother, Thomas, Duke of Exeter. Meale's examples include, as well as other Arthurian works, some non-Arthurian romances (discussed further by Saunders in this volume). Though examples are less numerous than for holy books, women certainly left romances to other women, again suggesting reading networks of family and friends.[10] Secular works were also owned and read by nuns, for example in Syon Abbey and the Benedictine nunnery of Amesbury.[11]

As well as owning, women commissioned books, both sacred and secular. Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne represent celebrated twelfth-century examples: both promoted writing in the vernacular, including history and romance. Wace's *Roman de Brut* is associated with Eleanor by La3amon, while Benoît de Sainte-Maure praises her as a patron. It is tempting to connect other romances written at the English court of Eleanor and Henry II with her, including Thomas's *Tristan*. Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* may also be connected with their court, while the prologue to his *Le Chevalier de la charrette* claims it is written at Marie de Champagne's request. Also in the twelfth century, A *Life of St Margaret of Scotland* was written for Margaret's daughter Matilda, wife of Henry I. Not all patronage was royal. The St Albans Psalter was presented to Christina of Markyate sometime after she founded and became prioress of Markyate in 1145; probably commissioned by Geoffrey de Gorron, abbot of St Albans, as her *Life* is likely to have been, it directly addresses Christina. A *Life of St Lawrence* was written for an anonymous twelfth-century woman. Eleanor de Bohun commissioned the 'Edinburgh Psalter' (National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 18.6.5) in the late fourteenth century. Meale also makes the tantalising suggestion that Eleanor was actively involved in her husband Thomas, Duke of Gloucester's acquisition of books for his celebrated library.[12] In the fifteenth century, Alice Chaucer may have been involved in the commission of a copy of John Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* (British Library Arundel MS 119), as well as perhaps being the patron of Lydgate's poem *The Virtues of the Mass* and his translation of Guillaume Deguileville's *Pélerinage de la vie humaine*. Other women were patrons of individual religious works by Lydgate, including Eleanor de Bohun's daughter and granddaughter. Elizabeth Berkeley, the first wife of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, was the patron of a verse translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* by John Walton (1410), while her daughter, Margaret Talbot, not only owned devotional books but also commissioned Lydgate's *Guy of Warwick*, the protagonist of which was the legendary ancestor of the Earls of Warwick. In the same period, Osbern Bokenham wrote at least some of his female

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saints' lives for women patrons. Of his *Legends of Holy Women*, the Life of Mary Magdalen states it was commissioned by Isabel Bourchier, Countess of Eu, sister of Richard, Duke of York, and that of Elizabeth of Hungary by Elizabeth de Vere, Countess of Oxford; four more are dedicated to women.[13] The Vernon manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Eng. Poet. MS a. 1, 1390–1400) contains numerous works written for women, including Aelred of Rievaulx's *De insititutione inclusarum*, written for his sister, a nun; works by Richard Rolle written for female recluses; and the first book of Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, originally written for a woman, as well other works concerning female piety.[14] It seems likely that the collection was made for a community of nuns or devout laywomen. Such instances demonstrate an active culture of patronage by women that includes the commissioning of both secular and religious writing, and close engagement with composition and translation, as well as a more general topos of female readership.

Women's literary culture connects with and may overlap with male literary culture: women engaged actively with and collaborated with learned circles of men. These circles were frequently clerical, as is suggested by the examples of Meister Eckhardt and of the priest-confessors who acted as amanuenses for Birgitta of Sweden and Margery Kempe; in Norwich Kempe had access to a lively clerical and intellectual circle. Circles could also be courtly – as is suggested, for example, by the role of the husband in the conduct book *Le Ménagier de Paris* (*c.* 1393), who instructs his young wife in the skills of both hunting and hawking, offering a context for the knowledge of women that makes the attribution of *The Book of St Albans* to Dame Juliana Berners credible. Joan of Arc's letters reached beyond France to England and are addressed to Henry VI and John Duke of Bedford. Marie de France's address to Henry II or perhaps his son suggests the engagement of the court of Henry and Eleanor of Aquitaine with courtly writing. Christine de Pizan's close relationships with her patrons – Louis I of Orleans, Philip the Bold of Burgundy, and his son, John the Fearless – and the direction of her writings to noblemen and princes, provide clear evidence of shared literary culture.

In part, then, this book also offers a corrective to the notion that medieval women's literary history represents a tradition distinct from that of men. Simultaneously to work on women's writing, considerable research has been undertaken in the last several decades into the literary contexts of male writers, their working practices, and their relationships with scribes, patrons, and audiences. All have been subject to close and necessary scrutiny, as have the connections between England and the

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Continent. Yet, while there have been numerous informative studies of women or gender in the work of male medieval writers, these are not typically connected to women's literary culture. There has been extensive work too on the representation of women across different literary genres, and in relation to literary and cultural history. All these strands have too often existed in parallel rather than being brought together. But, as the essays in this volume on major genres and on the writing of Chaucer and Gower suggest, a truly comprehensive exploration of women's literary culture must also take account of the treatment of women within literary works, both in terms of generic conventions and the engagement of male authors with women as subjects. We can never recover the responses of female readers, nor, as Melissa Furrow has emphasised in relation to romance, can we assume there was a single characteristic response.[15] The treatment of women as literary subjects, however, indubitably played a part in shaping the literary culture in which they also participated.

The very nature of that culture is multilingual and inclusive. Essays in this volume, therefore, engage with English, French, and Latin works, and look beyond, for example, to German, Welsh, and Scottish Gaelic literary culture. The book places writing within Britain in a wider European context, including, for instance, early English women missionaries in Francia, and it emphasises the multilingual and multicultural contexts of women's literary culture, looking beyond England to consider wider British, European, and more distant (including Arabic) influences. Essays explore book production and authorship; reception; linguistic, literary, and cultural contexts and influences; women as readers; and women as subjects. The volume is structured by topic, but individual sections and essays also consider chronological developments. Crucial questions recur across the volume. How were books produced and circulated? What was the role of women in these processes? What were the linguistic and cultural contexts of these works? How important were European and global traditions and influences? How are women represented, whether as authors, readers, or subjects? How does this change over time?

Patrons, Owners, Writers, and Readers

The first three essays focus on powerful, literate, and often multilingual women in England and Scotland, queens and abbesses, noblewomen and nuns, and on the literary and learning communities that they fostered and to which they contributed. Such women are often, wrongly, thought of as exceptional, but in fact, throughout the Middle Ages and across Europe,

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far from being marginal, elite women were at the heart of politics, society, and literary culture. Elaine Treharne's study of medieval nuns and abbesses as scribes focuses on manuscript evidence from post-Conquest England, especially in relation to changing institutional ownership. Looking initially at an early-twelfth-century legal manuscript from St Paul's London (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 383), Treharne draws our attention to short texts that were subsequently added to it by one 'Matilda' for the benefit of a female audience. Matilda's exact identity is unknown, but she was clearly educated and almost certainly was a nun, possibly from Barking Abbey. Similar additions are made to another manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton MS Vespasian D. xiv) which contains homilies and saints' lives, this time by an 'ancilla' or nun, who inserted prayers that she had authored herself sometime in the late twelfth century. Again, the scribe and writer may have been a nun at Barking, possibly associated with Abbess Mary Becket. These findings are so important because, as Treharne points out, there is very little proof of women's scribal activity in medieval England (in contrast with, for example, Germany and the Low Countries); hitherto scholars have assumed that manuscripts are written and glossed by men. Treharne outlines the sorts of evidence that could be considered to assign more anonymous scribal activity to women, concluding that medieval women scribes are everywhere, but to find them we need to read between the lines.

Mary Dockray-Miller's chapter shifts our focus from religious to secular women, although, as she observes, the two categories were often not distinct from one another in the Middle Ages. Dockray-Miller outlines the importance of queens and noblewomen as 'makers' of literary culture from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries, when they played key roles as patrons and book owners. Women such as Emma of Normandy and Edith of Wessex, both involved in the production of historical narratives that they commissioned, were not isolated from their counterparts on the continent but were very much part of a wider Northern European network of culturally sophisticated aristocrats. Further evidence of the importance of understanding continental connections when considering elite women's literary cultures is provided by Judith of Flanders, who joined the royal court in England and commissioned four highly ornate Gospel Books. As Dockray-Miller explains, women's literary and religious cultures often overlapped, as is also illustrated in the examples of Margaret of Scotland; her daughter Matilda, who married Henry I of England; her granddaughter Matilda, who married the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V; and her sister-in-law Adela, Countess of Blois. Dockray-Miller contends that

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Eleanor of Aquitaine, who is probably the most well-known example of a medieval literary patron, is not, therefore, the exception that she has often been considered. Rather, her activities have to be understood in terms of a widespread culture of aristocratic women's cultural patronage that extends as far as Georgia, and from the Byzantine to the Mughal Empires, as is evidenced by the activities of Queen Tamar of Georgia, Anna Comnena, and Gulbadan Banu Begum.

In contrast to the studies by Treharne and Dockray-Miller of women as scribes and authors, patrons and book owners, Mary C. Erler's chapter focuses more specifically on the education of religious women, figured in terms of horizontal and vertical learning, in England at the very end of the Middle Ages. Erler's analysis highlights connections between women rather than the more widely discussed relationships between women and their male spiritual advisors. Exploring the sorts of texts that were obtained by women leaders of the late medieval women's houses, including the powerful English Birgittine abbey of Syon, Erler notes that the superiors acquired works relating to the religious rule of life and also other devotional texts, and were concerned with obtaining texts that would enable their communities to understand their life and governance. Erler argues that such works were not obtained for private study but would have been shared with the nuns via the vertical learning of refectory and other communal readings. Alongside this, more traditional horizontal learning or hierarchical instruction also took place in women's houses: nuns were expected to emulate their elders, and the elders in turn to offer guidance, including in relation to their reading, to which the exchange of books between nuns was essential. Finally, Erler finds evidence of more formal convent instruction, framed in compassionate and supportive terms.

Circles and Communities in England

The second group of essays focuses on literary communities, networks, and wider circles, whether religious (the critical tradition of *Ancrene Wisse* and its related texts; the textuality centred on Syon Abbey) or secular (the reading of the women in the Paston family). Michelle M. Sauer's chapter focuses primarily on the modern reception of *Ancrene Wisse*, and, by implication, the larger so-called *Ancrene Wisse* Group of which it is a part. *Ancrene Wisse*, or the *Guide for Anchoresses*, an anonymous thirteenth-century Middle English text written for a group of three anchoresses in the West Midlands, survives in a significant number of manuscripts, and its place within the literary tradition of medieval women in England seems

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uncontroversial. However, as Sauer explains, nineteenth- and twentieth-century editors of the *Ancrene Wisse* and related works, most of whom were men, tended to focus on the linguistic significance of these texts, paying little attention to their gendered devotional context. They also placed much greater emphasis on speculation concerning the identity of the male author of *Ancrene Wisse* than on examining the role of its immediate audience – the three anchoresses themselves – in shaping the work addressed to them. Women scholars working on the *Ancrene Wisse* Group have, in contrast, tended to be more aware of the importance of the material in relation to the history of women's anchoritism and more open to the possibility of women's authorship of some of the works within this group. Sauer argues that *Ancrene Wisse* had an expansive direct and indirect influence not only on later texts but also on women's devotional traditions, which, she suggests, may even have extended beyond England.

The rich textual history of Syon Abbey, the only English house of St Birgitta of Sweden's Order of St Saviour (discussed by Erler in relation to her larger consideration of the learning of late medieval nuns), is Laura Saetveit Miles's focus. Although there is limited evidence of English Birgittine nuns authoring their own texts, Miles demonstrates the myriad influences St Birgitta, Syon Abbey, and its community of nuns as well as monks had on women's literary culture in fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century England. While the significance of Syon within the late medieval English cultural landscape cannot be overemphasised, like Dockray-Miller Miles challenges ideas of exceptionalism, arguing that its (textual) community is also representative of the intricacies of women's literary culture. As Erler has also shown, Syon women were certainly engaged in the commissioning of texts, and Miles demonstrates that this was not limited to the superiors but extended to aristocratic lay women with close ties to the abbey. Furthermore, the Syon community, led by Abbess Elizabeth Gibbs, was quick to exploit the new technology of printing, also supported by the patronage of wealthy noble women, such as Lady Margaret Beaufort. However, as Miles observes, the textuality of the abbey expanded beyond these powerful women to include the wider community of Syon nuns, and beyond England into continental Europe.

Diane Watt turns to the domestic circle of the Paston family, to explore the unique insights into the lives and book ownership of a late medieval gentry family offered by its fifteenth-century correspondence. The archive includes many letters written by women, although the most prolific of the correspondents, Margaret Mautby Paston, was almost certainly unable to write, and probably unable to read, calling upon her sons, servants, and chaplain to act as

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