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## *Gender, Text, Critic: The Case of Holkham Misc. 41*

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The recent spate of interest in texts written by and for women in the later middle ages has led to the publication of all and parts of a number of previously unknown and still-uncanonical texts. Accompanying those texts has been an equal number of critical judgments of their content, history, authorship, and contextual circumstances; however, in the rush to publish, sometimes those judgments have proven to be incomplete, incorrect, or premature. These judgments, furthermore, may have been greatly influenced by the changes in the kinds of training medievalists now receive; therefore, studying an example of a manuscript where valid challenges may be made to its published forms may yield important benefits to us as scholars, critics, and users of edited texts.

A case in point is Bodley ms. Holkham Misc. 41, an early fifteenth-century manuscript largely unknown to scholars. The manuscript, which measures 160 x 110 mm, contains 99 parchment bifolia (or 198 manuscript pages). It is written in a competent, much-abbreviated scribal Textura hand of the first half of the fifteenth century; the letter forms and ink color suggest a date between 1430 to 1450, though the texts contained were probably written at the end of the fourteenth or very earliest part of the fifteenth century, and the scribe has retained both *þ* and *z*. The manuscript was cropped, probably by its seventeenth-century binder; a family crest blindstamped in gold on the front cover has not been identified. Based on the way the decorations on the first page have been reduced by the cropping, it is reasonable to assume that it probably was some 20 mm taller and 20 mm wider in its earliest incarnation, making it a comfortable octavo volume. Any information on the flyleaves has been obscured by the addition of four paper leaves glued into the binding; the glue has held well, and no traces of what may have lain on the medieval flyleaves can be recovered.

That is, if there were any medieval flyleaves at all. Figure 1 shows a positive print of page one of the text. It is much discolored and damaged by damp and by mildew; some of the size has actually flaked

off the page (especially in one crucial point), and the ink itself has blurred. This suggests the page has been unprotected by leaves or boards since early in its existence, leading to extensive damp and mildew damage. The letters can just barely be deciphered; it is easier to look at it as a photographic negative image, where the reverse imagery at least makes most of the surviving letter forms clear. Neither ultraviolet nor infrared light is particularly useful for deciphering the page, though IR examination does permit the recovery of some letter forms (discussed below). The language of the text is Southeast Midlands with a few smatterings of Northeast Midlands mixed in, fully consistent with its probable origin in or around Norfolk. The manuscript was acquired by the Bodleian Library after World War II from the Coke family of Norfolk—the inscription of Thomas William Coke and his bookplate of the late eighteenth century are on the paper flyleaves. How it ended up in the Coke family's library before it came to Bodley is not clear.

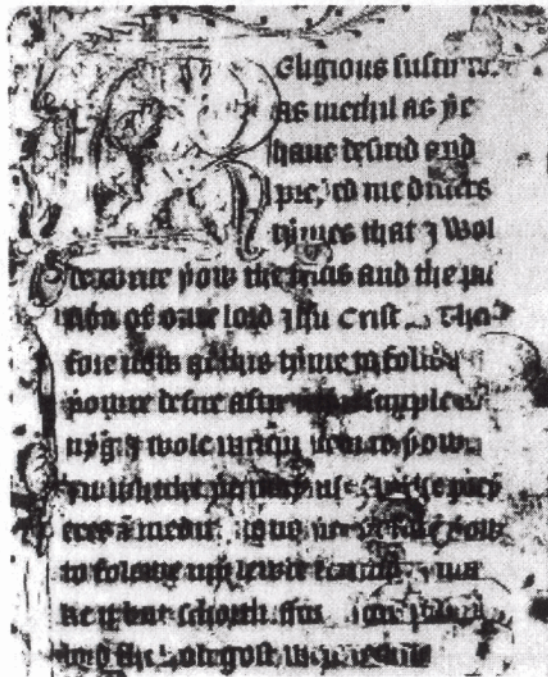


Fig. 1: MS Holkham Misc 41, p.1

Perhaps because it is so hard to read the first page of the first text, the few scholars who have looked at this volume have tended to note only the third and final text, which occupies pages 99-193 of the manuscript. This is William Flete's *Remedies against Temptations*, in the third and final Middle English recension often attributed in manuscript to Walter Hilton. Flete's original Latin version dates to 1359, but the last Middle English version is usually placed in the late 1380s. It was frequently owned by lay men and women; Edmund Colledge and Noel Chadwick, who prepared the only modern edition of this recension, say that "surviving examples have inscriptions showing that they were in the possession of . . . merchant traders, . . . [of] a great lady and patroness of religion, of secular priests and colleges, and of Benedictine, Augustinian, Birgittine, Carthusian and Cistercian houses."<sup>1</sup> The text reminds its readers of the dangers posed to people in the world by the attractions of riches, praise, and vanity; it is straightforward Middle English pious literature. In the Holkham manuscript, it is given the scribal title *Consolacio anime*, which is rubricated in red (though the picture is in black and white); see figure 2. Immediately preceding the

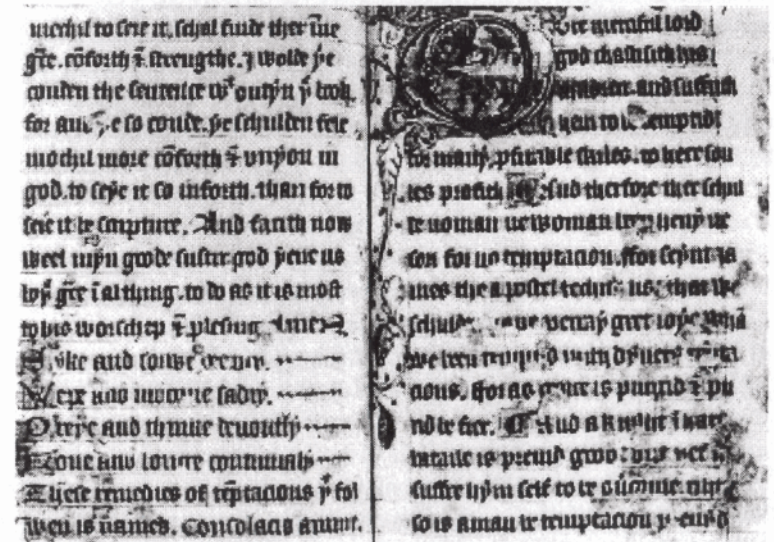


Fig. 2: Holkham Misc. MS 41, pp. 98-99.

opening of the Flete/Hilton text is a four-line rubricated Middle English verse, "Syke and sorwe deeply; wepe and moorne sadly; preye and thinke deuoutly; Loue and longe continuali" (*IMEV* 3102).<sup>2</sup> This verse appears in at least seven other Middle English manuscripts. The red ink appears to have been used deliberately to set the poem off from the texts which precede and follow it.

But the reason why this little manuscript is so interesting to scholars of later Middle English literature—and especially scholars interested in the question of what was written for and by women—lies in the first text in the manuscript, which occupies pages 1-98. Once we get past the difficulties imposed by the manuscript's condition, the words themselves must grab our attention. The text begins:

Religious sustir in as mechil as ye have desirid and preyed me  
divers tymes that I wolde write yow the festis and the passion  
of oure lord Ihesu Crist. Therefore now at this tyme to folwen  
yowre desire aftir myn simple c<un>nyng I wole writin hem  
to yow. (1)

This is a unique text, a collection of some fifty prayers reflecting on incidents in the life of our Lord and associating with each incident a prayer for a particular kind of grace. A text addressed to an unknown woman—to a sister in religion—is in and of itself interesting enough to merit careful scrutiny. But when the author goes on to give us a tantalizing glance at her own identity, we have an even more interesting text.

¶O myn sustir preie my lord god the Trinite that for his gret  
bounte. and for his endeles mercy. have mercy and pite on me  
sinful. and make me a good woman. for ful ofte sinne and  
wre<c>chidnes withdrawwith my gosteli syht from his glorious  
presence. and ther fore yow and othere of his special children  
I preie to purchase me sum grace of that benigne lord in whom  
al grace is in. (3)

This identifies the text as the apparent work of a female author in a time when we can identify few authors of either gender concretely; as such, it is of particular interest to scholars working on gender and literacy in the late Middle Ages.

The Holkham manuscript was noticed by Colledge and Chadwick for their edition of Flete, though the tone of their comments about the author of the prayer sequence borders on the patronizing:

There is probably nothing in these exercises which is original and which cannot be paralleled from similar compilations; but they give us a clear and pleasing picture of the abilities and interests of a mediaeval woman, well versed in Scripture, able in pastoral theology, interested in the techniques and the theory of prayer, which is of value as illustrating the capacities of a nun writing in an age when self-expression was rarely possible. (11)

Their claims will be revisited below.

The manuscript apparently received no published mention between Colledge and Chadwick and 1983, when I chanced upon it while holding one of Germaine Greer's Tulsa bursaries in Oxford. I was interested in it as a sequence of prayers because I was working on a dissertation concerning the rhetoric of medieval prayer; at the time it seemed more interesting for content than for authorship. After analyzing the text for my 1985 dissertation,<sup>3</sup> I spoke about this text at Kalamazoo in 1986 and 1987,<sup>4</sup> and at MLA in 1988. The 1986 paper became a chapter in Judson Allen's festschrift, though that book did not appear until 1992.<sup>5</sup> At Kalamazoo in 1987 I was approached by another scholar, William Pollard of Belmont College in Kentucky, who had seen the manuscript for the first time in the summer of 1985; he was interested in some linguistic echoes of the mystics in the text. I had been planning to work on an edition of the text, but Pollard wanted to undertake that project and said he had a publisher lined up, so it seemed politic to let him go forward. (Unfortunately, his edition has never appeared.) Pollard did print an article about the prayers in one of Marion Glasscoe's Exeter Conference volumes, though he did not mention any of my work on the text.<sup>6</sup>

In the intervening years, Bodley Holkham Misc. 41 has shown up in print only twice more to my knowledge. In 1995, J. T. Rhodes made a passing reference to it in a footnote in Ian Doyle's festschrift,<sup>7</sup> although with no real critical attention. But in 1992, when Alexandra Barratt published her valuable anthology *Women's Writing in Middle English*,<sup>8</sup> she included a few excerpts from Holkham Misc. 41. And here, for scholars, is where the controversy begins.

Take as a starting point the title of the text. The scribe names it "The {Something} and the Passion of Oure Lord Ihesu Crist." Colledge and Chadwick read the difficult word as "feitis"—a rare but not unattested form of the noun "fēt" and consistent with Southeast Midlands spellings. The word means "act" or "deed" and enters the language in the late fourteenth century, though its use is not frequent for another century, and none of the instances cited by the *MED* apply to the life of Christ or specific religious events or actions. "Festis" is attested from the late thirteenth century, usually in conjunction with holy days and religious festivals and occasionally with noteworthy events. Therefore, semantics alone cannot distinguish a correct reading.

The reading is complicated by the facts that, first, the vellum is patched at this spot (and was in the Middle Ages); second, mildew has damaged the letters; and third, the sizing has come off the skin here. The only way to recover the lost letters is under infrared light; using that means, I determined in 1983 that what looks like the minim "i" is actually the lower part of an ascending "s" in ligature—as you see in "sustir," figure 3b. So I read and printed the title as "The Festis." Pollard, who had discussed the manuscript with me at Kalamazoo, agreed with this reading (as did one reviewer of this article). The scribe's letter forms are distinct; compare the word forms below in Figures 3a, b, and c. The distinctions between the diphthongs "ai" and "ei" are significant, as is the shape of the "sti" ligature seen in "sustir."



Fig. 3a; "araied"



Fig. 3b; "sustir"



Fig. 3c; "seie"

But Barratt doubly complicates the issue. First, she returns to the "feitis" reading that Colledge and Chadwick use; her introduction to

the text begins "*The Feitis and the Passion of Our Lord Jhesu Crist* is a collection of meditative prayers..." (205). Aside from the two mistranscriptions in "our" and "jhesu," her reading is certainly defensible from the text. But the running head she chooses to use over the text on subsequent text pages is "The Faits and the Passion of Our Lord Jesu Christ" (see page 207 ff.). Here there are four distinct transcription errors. The vowel in the text is clearly an "e," not an "a," and the suffix is definitely "-is." The spellings of "Ihesu" and "Crist" are also clear in the manuscript. "Faits" is not a Southeast Midlands spelling; therefore it is linguistically inconsistent with the provenance of the manuscript. Barratt further asserts that "The only discussion of this text is Pollard 1987" (206). If she is looking for the work under the title "The Faits and Passion," this is not to be wondered at.

Which brings us, I think, to George Eliot's wry assertion about remaining calm and calling things by the same names other people call them by. Under what title should a scholar or student trying to track this text look for it? It is difficult enough to search for an anonymous text in the *MLA International Bibliography* without further confusion of names. Since Barratt's text is available and the only text of any of the prayers in wide circulation, her "Faits" will probably be the title that sticks—even though the word is in the wrong dialect form for Norfolk, and the noun "faits" is not in wide use until the very late fifteenth century. How can we begin to solve the problems that this text poses if we can't even agree what to call it?

And that's only the tip of the iceberg. As Annette Kolodny has remarked, we find in works of literature what we hope to find in them. Pollard's work was with the mystics, so he selects out of the 98 pages of text the dozen or so linguistic echoes that may stem from mystic influence. Words like "famulier speche" and "daliaunce," in Pollard's reading, are enough to place the anonymous author firmly in the mystic camp, he feels, despite the fact that they are common terms in late medieval devotional writings. That such images are also the stuff of medieval romantic poetry—the kinds of reading that medieval women of certain classes were familiar with—is not considered in his article on the manuscript. It is equally possible that the presence of such words indicates how blurred the line between mystic and orthodox devotional language had become by the early fifteenth century.

Barratt, who has worked a great deal on the manuscripts from the Brigittine house of Syon Abbey, naturally finds Brigittine reflexes in the text, especially in the four-line poem that separates it from Flete's

text. She in fact prints the lyric in her edition as if it were part of the prayer sequence, rather than a separate text highlighted and set off by the scribe in red letters. She rightly notes that it appears in four manuscripts with mystic connections; however, it also occurs in four manuscripts with no such connections. Therefore, its presence alone necessarily makes neither the author of the prayers nor the scribe a Brigittine. Barratt (based on one remark in a late prayer about "those who hate the people of Holy Church") also implies that the writer rejected Wycliffite clerical criticism. Like Rhodes, who concludes that the prayers "are unusual in mentioning the needs of the church and in exhorting the audience to take their fellow Christians with them in their prayers" (409n4), these readings show a certain unfamiliarity with medieval prayer—both attitudes are, if not commonplace, at least well represented in orthodox prayer. But since this genre has been so little studied, even by scholars who are aware of the connections between piety and literacy, such questionable generalizations may be unavoidable.

Colledge and Chadwick's remarks quoted earlier are perhaps more provoking in their patronizing tone. Actually, if read without irony, they are quite accurate. For there *are* instances of originality in the prayers, and the prayers are clearly rhetorically tailored to a female audience. For instance, consider how this domestic commonplace is used:

Furtheremore sustir <sith> as a / man may se that it is not faire ne semli for a gret lord to comyn in to a foul hows. but first the hous must be swepid and mad fair + clene and honestli araied. Rith so it is not fair ne semli for oure lord god to comyn in to oure soule. ne we to make us homly with him with famulier [sic] speche + loving daliaunce. yef ony spot of sinne be with inne us wilfulli. til the hous of oure conscience be clene swepid be confession and maad fair be contricion. and the soule honestli arraied w<sup>it</sup> meknesse. and alle other gostli vertues. or ellis to stonde in/ good wil and desir to have alle goode vertues. and seke + preie therefore. And be the endeles mercy of oure lord god. that good wil schal been acceptid as for dede. yef a man seke besili ther aftir. (3-5)

Though this is a common enough image, the emphasis on the correct running of a household speaks clearly to the domestic concerns of a female reader.

The author may have been a nun—or perhaps a recluse, for there is one prayer addressed to the needs of people in such estates:

O. goode lord have pite + compassion on hem alle that wilfulli for youre love beith solitarie. Ancres. Reclusis. and hermites. and alle. estatis reclusid. fulfille hem w<sup>it</sup> perfith grace that thei may leven vertuouli. and yeve hem myht and strengthe to withstonde alle temptacions of þe flesch. and of þe feend. Pater noster. Ave maria. (27)

This is one of many prayers for those in religious estates, including the standard prayer for the Pope and cardinals that was partially obliterated, probably during the Tudor period (15). Of course, the author does not identify herself as being a religious or a recluse, simply calling herself the reader's "sustir"; she merely includes such religious in her prayers. But whoever she was, she was a writer of great learning: her Biblical translations are apparently original. She quotes the *Glossa Ordinaria* as well as material in the breviary and ordinaries. She cites the apocryphal story of Ezekiel's illness (which survives only in Latin versions). She incorporates into her sequence common rhetorical prayer forms like the Seven Oes and bidding prayers. Her metaphors and imagery are feminine, domestic, and very vivid. Colledge and Chadwick are right to say that she certainly was "able in pastoral theology" and "interested in the techniques and theory of prayer" (11), for she spends some time both in the beginning and the end of the text explaining why each meditation is accompanied by a Pater Noster and Ave Maria, discussing how the recipient should use the texts, and explaining the theory of penance. She can justify including non-Gospel stories on theological and pedagogical grounds.

It is not, for instance, beyond the realm of possibility that a woman like Julian of Norwich could have written these prayers. They are linguistically and semantically of the right dialect area, the right register of vocabulary, and the right historical age to be written by someone like Julian, and the manuscript is probably only a generation or so later than Julian's lifetime. A careful stylistic and syntactic examination might well show whether such an assertion holds weight. The prayers are as orthodox as "The Prayers of the Creature" that conclude *The Book of Margery Kempe*—in fact, they are very similar in diction. If this is what we are to assume are "the capacities of a nun," then the educational and stylistic preparation such women religious

may have been given is certainly far greater than we currently believe.

I would argue, therefore, that as critics of medieval literature and scholars interested in how gender, culture, and rhetoric intersect in texts addressed to women, we need to look carefully at texts like the Holkham Misc. manuscript—whatever you want to call it. For starters, there are these questions to be answered:

- To what extent is this material original?
- If the material comes from sources, where might the writer have been exposed to them?
- Are the few indications of mystic connection enough to argue that this is a mystic's text, or are they evidence that what we consider "mystic" elements were acceptable in mainstream piety?
- Where did the female author develop her comfortable familiarity with Latin texts—even going so far as to quote them? (Not all are commonplaces of religious devotion.)
- What about the manuscript? How did a text written by one woman for a religious sister—probably a nun—end up being copied by a professional scribe in a heavily abbreviated manuscript, with expensive flourishes including colored capitals, vine-leaf decoration, and three illuminated capitals? For whom was such a manuscript copied? Where in Norfolk was it possible to get manuscripts of this professional quality?
- What about the companion texts? Flete's *Remedies* are more directed to a person in the lay community who needs to resist temptation—his illustrations (and those included by the Middle English redactor) revolve around characters like squires and lords. But whoever prepared this edition of the text carefully substituted "man and woman" for every occasion of generic "man" in the original—arguing that this manuscript copy was in fact intended for a fairly wealthy woman—someone like Margery Kempe in her flush times, or perhaps Margaret Paston. And why was this particular lyric added? Because the medieval flyleaves are covered or missing, the usual ownership marks that might reveal some of these answers are unavailable to us. Linguistic reconstruction may be our only hope for tracing such a text.
- Finally, why do so many texts like this one seem to originate in the Southeast Midlands around Norfolk in the early fifteenth century? Was this area the religious Bible Belt Eamon Duffy implies it was? Certainly, based on the evidence surviving from the area, we have

already had to redefine our notion of women's pious literacy—these books were written for and read by women who may not have been "learned" in Latin but certainly were textual.

To work on this text and ones like it requires technical skills from a wide historical period in medieval studies. Just as important as the ability to judge the text paleographically, to read and decode its letter shapes, to examine its palimpsest qualities and to evaluate it on codicological and lexical grounds, are the abilities to manipulate it technologically; for instance, it is much easier to read the terms on the first page when they have been "cleaned up" using modern computer image enhancement techniques (see figure 4 for an example). Yet how many programs in medieval studies now include such technical training in their curricula? Conversely, the advent of the age of theory, valuable as it has been, has meant that many of the practical but old-fashioned "hands-on" courses in language, philology, paleography, and text manipulation have been replaced with coursework in critical theory, cultural studies, and gender implications.

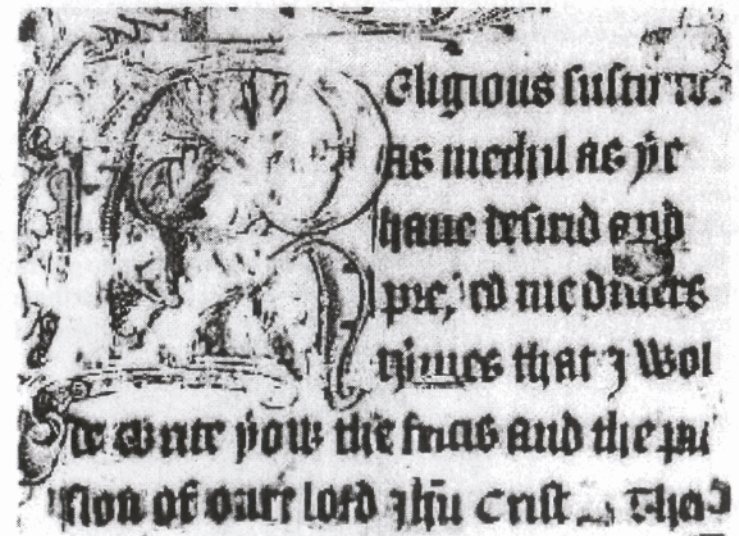


Fig. 4: MS Holkham Misc. 41 p. 1, airbrushed to remove mildew and moisture damage.

While this curricular shift has strengthened our approaches to medieval texts, it has paradoxically made us more dependent on printed editions; scholars who have not had the training or the opportunity to examine manuscripts first-hand must rely on the acumen and accuracy of editors. With a scholar of Professor Barratt's reputation, one assumes that the text will be as accurate as possible; had I not known from personal experience that her transcription and title were questionable, I should have accepted them unconditionally out of my respect for her work and in my enthusiasm to go on and discuss the manuscript. Lacking a complete edition of the prayers, I would be inclined to believe Pollard's assertions about their mystic orientation; again, only my own personal knowledge of the rhetoric of prayer and the texts in the Holkham manuscript led me to challenge his interpretation. No scholar can know every Middle English text in detail; we all take edited texts more or less on trust, with the notable exception of *Piers Plowman*, where the work of George Kane, E. Talbot Donaldson, and George Russell has forced us to confront the relationship between manuscript(s) and edition. To what extent are the edited texts we use unstable and unreliable, and to what extent does our unawareness of those facts limit the conclusions we draw about those texts?

There is clearly a lot of room for work on a text like this one. Pollard and Barratt have started interesting lines of inquiry, and, while I may occasionally question their accuracy, I think they have identified important issues for us to consider. Catherine Innes-Parker in Prince Edward Island is beginning to look at this text as well, and we have discussed the possibility of electronically editing the text—maybe even publishing it to the Web—so that more people can work on it. I firmly believe that if we can decide on what to call this text—and if we can treat it on its own terms rather than forcing it into categories that do not fit and making sweeping judgments about a little-known genre—that there is more than enough meat in this little-known text to satisfy our critical appetites for some time to come.

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#### NOTES

I am grateful to the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, for permission to reprint brief selections from ms. Holkham Misc. 41, pages 1 and 98-99. All images in this text were scanned from a microfilm of the manuscript using Adobe Printshop 3.0.5

and a Polaroid SprintScan 35/LE slide scanner. Figure 4 has been digitally enhanced using Microsoft ImageComposer 1.0. I am indebted to the Instructional Technology Center of Winthrop University for its assistance.

- 1 Edmund Colledge and Noel Chadwick, *Remedies Against Temptations: The Third English Version of William Flete*, Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pretà 14 (Rome: Abete, 1968): 4.
- 2 *The Index of Middle English Verse*, ed. Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins (New York: Columbia UP, 1943).
- 3 "The Language of Prayer in Middle English, 1200-1400: A Rhetorical Taxonomy," diss. UNC-Chapel Hill, 1985.
- 4 "The Abbess' ABC," XXII International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, May 7-10, 1987; "Women as Readers and Writers of Manuscripts in the Fifteenth Century," XXII International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, May 7-10, 1987; "The Festis and the Passion of our Lord Ihesu Christ: A Middle English Prayer Sequence for Women," XXI International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, May 8-11, 1986; "Lerned Bokes and Lew(e)d Women," Modern Language Association, New Orleans, Dec. 27-30, 1988.
- 5 "'Thys ys my mystrys boke': English Women as Readers and Writers in Late Medieval England," *The Uses of Manuscripts in Literary Studies: Essays in Memory of Judson Boyce Allen*, ed. Charlotte C. Morse, Penelope R. Doob, and Marjorie C. Woods, Studies in Medieval Culture 31 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Press, 1992) 305-27.
- 6 "Mystical Elements in a Fifteenth-Century Prayer Sequence: 'The Festis and the Passion of Oure Lord Ihesu Crist'," *The Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1987) 47-61.
- 7 "The Body of Christ in English Eucharistic Devotion, c. 1500-c. 1620," *New Science out of Old Books: Studies in Manuscripts and Early Printed Books in Honour of A.I. Doyle*, ed. Richard Beadle and A.J. Piper (Aldershot, Hants.: Scolar, 1995) 388-419.
- 8 New York: Longman (1992) 205-18.

