

THE USES OF  
MANUSCRIPTS  
IN LITERARY  
STUDIES



ESSAYS  
IN MEMORY OF  
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*'Thys ys my mystrys boke':  
English Women as Readers and Writers  
in Late Medieval England<sup>1</sup>*

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Could English women read and write in the late Middle Ages? If they could, what did they read and write? Depending on which learned tomes one consults, women were either totally ignorant; or barely able to read and write; or able to compose works of rhetorical sophistication but unable to write them down; or able to compose, write out, copy, and perhaps supervise the distribution of their works. Are any of these—or all of these—positions valid? We know some details about *men's* literacy: approximately how they learned to read and write, what they wrote, and how their manuscripts were copied and passed on. But what of their sisters? How did they learn to read and write?<sup>2</sup> Where did they fit into the literary and literate picture? In what ways did they participate in the manuscript culture of England in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries?

The canonical assumption in literary criticism—one might cynically call it phallogocentric—is that women *do* not fit into the picture, that they did not participate in the rise of vernacular literacy and the consequent explosion of works produced in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. As evidence to support this position, scholars advance the arguments that Eileen Power made almost seventy years ago with little reassessment. They assert that women could not attend the grammar schools run by the Church and thus lacked access to learning; that nunneries were frequently cited by ecclesiastical

authorities in the fifteenth century for the decline of their learning; and that for all the attempts to prove otherwise, the canon of English women writers in the late Middle Ages—if the term is not regarded as an oxymoron—must be limited to Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Dame Juliana Verners (the last of whom was actually Master Julian Verner, if the latest editor of the *Boke of St. Albans* is correct in assessing the scribal evidence [Hands Iv–Ix]).

As examples of how this assumption has affected critical assessment of the period, consider just three recent instances. One scholarly text on medieval readers and writers, written by an eminent woman critic, devotes a detailed forty-page chapter to vernacular literacy and education—and mentions only four women in it (Coleman ch. 2). (Two bequeathed manuscripts, a third provided patronage for a male author, and the fourth endowed a grammar school.) Another collection of essays on women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance includes only two essays about women who lived before 1500: one on Margery Kempe, the other on women religious who died to protect their chastity (Rose). Even the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (Gilbert and Gubar) limits the Middle English canon to Julian and Margery, and turns to Queen Elizabeth and the Renaissance with great relief. Here the old saws about women's literacy are repeated without re-examination, a particularly distressing circumstance given the context:

It is significant . . . that all the writers who flourished in these periods [the Middle Ages and Renaissance] were men. When we turn to the literary history of women in these nine hundred years, we find no texts in the Old English period that have been definitively identified as composed by women, hardly any works by medieval women, and very few indeed by Renaissance women. . . . It is likely, though, that most women did not write, first, because few had access to either the education or the social authority that would facilitate such activity, and second, because, mostly confined to

the home—whether farm, castle, or convent—and constrained by cultural definitions of femininity, most had neither the experience of public life nor the expectation of an audience that would foster creativity. (1)

As Annette Kolodny has aptly observed, we find in literary texts and periods what we expect to find there (151–58). If we believe women lived in only these three communities, we will not look for women writers in the middle or manorial classes. If we believe women only wrote 'creatively,' we will not search the numerous didactic and exegetical texts which survive, often obscurely catalogued, in manuscript. If we believe in the canonical literary histories, we will not look beyond them. If we believe there is little evidence of women's engagement with the literary and literate worlds, we will not expect to find it—and so we are not surprised when we do not.

But what if we change our expectations, discarding these long-ingrained canonical biases? Judson Allen properly argued that we must understand the medieval ways of responding to texts—both reading and, by extension, composing—"way[s] dependent on manuscripts, and further, on the manuscripts which happened to be available . . . in a culture in which books were relatively rare, vastly rarer than they are now" (359). What happens to our assessment of women's literacy when we actually examine the surviving manuscripts produced in medieval England? A different character of evidence emerges then, evidence that women wrote both complete works and letters, copied or had them copied, considered them their property, and proudly indicated their ownership of these texts. Manuscript evidence strongly suggests that women participated in the learned community, though perhaps not to the same extent as men. The character of that historical evidence, which I wish to survey briefly here, may lead us to construct a far different argument from what the canonical critical position predicts. Let me make it clear at the outset that this is by no means a compre-

hensive survey but rather an attempt to organize observations made while working on other projects. Nearly every medievalist to whom I have described this essay has been able to expand this list based on observations of his or her own. Clearly, far more documentation for the arguments I will advance is available than can be rehearsed in this space.

First there are those women authors who have been identified—Julian and Margery. Julian's literacy and scholarship are unquestionable; she is an accomplished stylist, confident, able to call on a wide range of sources.<sup>3</sup> Her spiritual predecessor, Hildegard of Bingen, tells us that when *she* began to write, the monk who was her *magister* sternly ordered her to keep her writings hidden; only when his abbot approved did the monk cooperate with Hildegard in her writing:

Ista cuidam monacho magistro meo intimavi, qui bone conversationis et diligentis intencionis ac veluti peregrinus a sciscitationibus morum multorum hominum erat, unde et eadem miracula libenter audiebat. Qui admirans michi iniunxit, ut ea absconse scriberem, donec videret que et unde essent. Intelligens autem quod a deo essent, abbati suo intimavit, magnoque desiderio deinceps in his mecum laboravit.

(*Vita*, PL 197; qtd. in Dronke 232)

Julian appears not to have had such strictures placed upon her; she wrote freely. Margery, the "pore creature," relied on amanuenses (one of whom apparently exceeded Chaucer's own Adam Sciveyn in obscurity) to record and read back her dictation for correction (*Book* 3–6; 214–16; 219–20). This may have been a function of her social status rather an indication of her inability to record her own thoughts; employment of a scribe was a sign of prestige, not necessarily an indication of illiteracy. The learned anchoress and the 'illiterate' housewife: these are the canonical figures of the women writer.

Beyond these two known authors, what else do we know of

medieval English women writers? As is typical with most medieval texts, authorial holograph manuscripts are the exception rather than the rule. More common are copies women ordered to be made for them or for women in their charge. Barking Abbey had a tradition of manuscript-making dating back to Asser's *Vita Alfredi*; the Barking Ordinary preserves a text once removed from its authoress, Katherine of Sutton, Abbess of Barking from 1363–76, who wrote three "animated" liturgical dramas (the term is Karl Young's [1: 167]) in Latin for the nuns of Barking. Her *Depositio*, *Elevatio*, and *Visitatio* dramatically develop the gospel accounts of the Adoration of the Cross in realistic and innovative fashion. In the colophon to Oxford Univ. Coll. MS. 169 the unnamed copyist notes that the Lady Sibilla de Felton, Katherine's successor, ordered the original to be recopied about 1404, the date of the Barking Ordinary. Sibilla also zealously supervised the *eleccio*, an annual distribution of books among the nuns, suggesting that a considerable portion of the community was literate. And Bodley MS. Holkham Misc. 41 preserves a copy of a prayer cycle composed by a woman, probably secluded, around 1400, for the use of women living together in a community (Tarvers).

Likewise a Kirklees Priory manuscript, now CUL MS. K.k.I.6, compiled by the amateur bibliophile Richard Fox (fol. 245<sup>v</sup>), contains a translation from French and Latin to English of the seven penitential Psalms, along with commentary, by Alyanore or Alinor Hull, a widow who ended her life in the Benedictine Priory at Cannington, Somersetshire, about 1460. We know that Alyanore was a book owner; her will leaves to her confessor both her large and small breviaries, her Psalter, and her "blue byble of Latin"—one of the rare copies of the Vulgate in medieval England (Barratt 88). Along with her confessor, the intriguingly-named Roger Huswyf, she donated a four-volume copy of Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilles on the Bible* to St. Albans in 1457 (Ker 301). Alyanore presumably made her translations in the second quarter

of the fifteenth century, and one scholar who has closely examined them contends that they were written for an audience, not limited to women, which read French and Latin as well as English (Barratt 95, 100).

Alyanore Hull's is not the only Benedictine woman's work of this period. Library of Congress MS. 4 preserves a translation of the Benedictine Rule into Middle English, probably from the alien Benedictine priory of Lyminster, made after 1415 by a woman scribe whose last name may have been Crane (Krochalis 29–30). An acerbic colophon (fol. 36<sup>r</sup>) scolding women who mishandle books also makes clear that Lyminster had a large enough library, and literate population, to follow the Rule's prescription to distribute a book to each member each year, for private reading:

nameliche, of these younge ladies, that thei be nought negligent for to leue here bokes to hem assigned behynde hem in the quer, neyther in cloystre, nether leye here bokes open other vnclosed, ne withoute kepinge, neither kitte out of no book leef ne quaiere, neyther write thereinne neyther put out, without leue, neyther leue no book out of the place. Ho so vnwitinge or [sic] his negligence of [sic] mys gouernaunce lest or alieneth [some text omitted; no gap in ms.] bote al so clene and enter that thei ben kept, and in same numbere and in the same state, or in bettre, yif it may, that they be yolde vp agayne in to the librarie, as they were afore in yer resseyued.

This colophon implies an active, if badly-behaved, group of women readers, who habitually wrote in and corrected their books, as well as cutting out leaves and whole quires of those texts which most engaged them. The call to return books in their original state, "or in bettre," implies a community much concerned about these valuable properties and their preservation. And the scribal errors in that text suggest that it may have been copied from a warning issued to some other group of women readers.

Other women's translations of the Rule survive from this period: the Northern metrical version (BL MS. Cott. Vesp. A. 25) was translated "tyll women to make it couth / that leris no latyn in thar youth" (fol. 66<sup>r</sup>). A Northern prose version of the Rule (BL MS. Lansdowne 378) was copied from a version written for men; the copyist occasionally confuses the pronouns. (This manuscript also contains a rite for administering the Eucharist to nuns.) And nuns play roles in other works; the recently-published *Revelation of Purgatory* (Harley) preserves a fifteenth-century woman's dream-vision of the pains of the nun Margaret after death. One can examine the catalogue of nearly any collection of late-medieval English manuscripts and find similar examples.

Works also survive which were written explicitly for women readers. Into this category fall not only early works such as *Ancrene Wisse* and Richard Rolle's *Form of Living* but Walter of Bibbesworth's *Tretiz de Langage*, composed for Dyonise de Mountechensi to enable her to teach her children French; the text had English glosses: "tut dis troverez-vous primes / le fraunceis e puis le engleise amount" (*Prol.* 20–21). *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*, a fifteenth-century translation into English of DeGuilleville's *Pelerinage de la Vie Humaine* was also intended for female instruction. New York Public Library MS. Spencer 19 of the *Pilgrimage* includes a translator's colophon, signed by one 'AK,' which indicates that the translation was intended for a noble lady.<sup>4</sup> *Disce Mori*, a catechetical treatise, is addressed to "my best-beloved Suster dame Alice," probably a nun of Sion (Patterson ch. 4). The prose *Life of St. Jerome* in Yale UL Beinecke MS. 317, "an unprepossessing little volume of Latin and English devotional writings," was prepared for Margaret, Duchess of Clarence; and the author, Symon Wynter, encouraged her "that hit sholde lyke your ladyship first to rede hit & to do cotype hit for yoursilf, & syth to lete oper rede hit & cotype hit, who so wyll" (Keiser, 32, 41). Another

manuscript of this work, MS. Lambeth Palace Library 432, expands on Wynter's instructions:

that not only ye shuld knowe hit the more clerely to your gostely profecte [sic], but also hit shuld mow abyde and turne to edificacion of othir that wold rede hit and do to copy hit for youre selfe, and sith to let other rede hit and copy hit, who so will.

*The Chastysing of God's Children* may have been written for a nun of Barking; *The Myroure of our Ladye* was translated for the nuns of Sion.

Likewise, *The Orcherd of Syon*, a translation of the *Dialogues* of St. Catherine of Siena, was prepared for the "religyouis modir & deuote sustren clepid & chosen bisily to laboure at the hous of Syon" (Hodgson and Liegey, 1). BL MS. Royal 18 A.X includes a form of confession for a woman. MS. Sidney Sussex College (Camb.) 74 contains a treatise on the *Ave Maria* addressed to gentlewomen. MS. Bodley 416 contains the long but acephalous *Boke to a Mother*, as well as a meditation explaining why women should behave on the Sabbath and holy days. Two nuns of Barking, Matilda Hayle and Mary Hastings, once owned BL Addit. 10596, a collection of devotional materials with the Wycliffite versions of the stories of Susanna and Tobias. Many of these manuscripts of pious readings later passed into male hands, according to ownership inscriptions; but their initial audience was literate women.

Women of course had held a place in the educational curriculum of the West since Plato's academy, and their activities as teachers in the early Christian period are well-documented; the names of Hild, Hrotsvitha, Heloise, and Hildegard figure prominently in the spread of Christian education. In fact the institutionalization of learning in monasteries, often double ones, further established a place for women at what Sister Prudence Allen calls "the centre of Christian philosophi-

cal activity," albeit in the theoretical rather than practical sense of the phrase. Allen argues strongly that it was the shift from monastic to university-based education, a shift in which women were excluded as teachers and students, which accelerated the separation of men's and women's "tracks" of education (414–15). Nevertheless, some evidence suggests that English women remained active in education. The notarial roles for Boston in 1404 list as a member of the Corpus Christi guild one Maria Mereflete, *magistra scholarum*—that is, mistress of a Latin grammar school; her own writing apparently does not survive (Adamson 59; Orme, 59, calls her 'Matilda'). Mereflete also provides a strong argument that some women were taught Latin grammar; how else could she teach it? An 'E. Scolemaysteresse' received a legacy from a London grocer in 1408; and an 'Elizabeth Scolemaystres' was active in the same city in 1441 (Orme, 55). Although fewer references to English schoolmistresses survive than to continental women teachers at the same time, clearly some English women were active as teachers outside convent walls.

One locus for such women teachers was in the Lollard movement. Among the names of women questioned and sometimes imprisoned for their literate activities are Alice Dexter, the anchoress Matilda, Anna Palmer, Agnes Nowers, Christina More, Agnes Tickhill, Dame Anne Latimer, Dame Alice Sturry, and Katherine Dertford (Cross 360–62). Often they shared their activities with their husbands and children, and wives seem to have carried on their teaching after the imprisonment or death of their husbands. An anonymous homilist in the late fourteenth century lamented that women as well as men served as preachers of the Gospel: "Ecce iam videmus tantam disseminacionem evangelii quod simplices viri et mulieres et in reputacione hominum laici ydiote scribunt et discunt evangelium et quantum possunt et sciunt docent et seminant verbum dei" (CUL MS. I.i.3.8, fol. 149<sup>v</sup>). Margaret Deanesly likewise identified a number of women active as teachers in the Lollard

movement; these women faced severe punishment, even death, for such public exercise of their literacy (357–58; 364; 367–79).

Then there are women's letters—substantial in number though again few in holograph. The Paston and Cely letters, for instance are often cited as evidence of women's inability to write, since these upper-middle class women employed scribes and only infrequently endorsed the letters. But employment of a scribe reflected the family's social status—and the ladies of these families, as well as of the Stonors and Plumptons, were indeed very conscious of their rank and consequence as members of the up-and-coming merchant class. They used secretaries as a sign of their social standing—and, if the twenty-nine men who wrote for Margaret Paston are any indication, they were not easy employers. There are several unchallenged women's holographs in the Paston letters, including Elyzabeth Brews' hasty request for armed men to protect her cows against repossession by the sheriff's men (Davis no. 820). The Duchess of Suffolk's intimate and imperative note to the youngest John Paston survives, asking for the loan of his lodgings for several days for a still-unknown reason (no. 798); Elizabeth Mundford's (no. 657) and Elizabeth Clere's (no. 724) correspondence about pending lawsuits include the latter's request for the loan of "j roll callyd domysday" in a real estate dispute. Clere's letter to John Paston I about his mother's abuse of his sister Elizabeth (no. 446) is frequently quoted; but while the part of the letter about the younger Elizabeth's "broken head" is often repeated, few note that her cousin Clere asked John to burn the letter to preserve secrecy or that it was "wretyn in hast on Seynt Peterys Day be candel lyght" in her own hand. Other women's holographs include Margery Cely's "sympyll letter" announcing her first pregnancy to her husband (Hanham no. 222), and Elyzabeth Stonor Rich's letter concerning her "crayzed" daughter Catherine and Elyzabeth's attempts to acquire some of the family silver by subterfuge (Kingsford no. 168). These women all

habitually used secretaries and expected scribal copies of their manuscripts to be produced. However, it is equally clear that they could produce manuscripts of their own when circumstances and their own temperaments so moved them, although occasional self-deprecating comments indicate their awareness of their letters' 'unprofessional' appearance. Asta Kihlbohm comments that Elizabeth Rich "could write very well if she chose, though her bold impatient hand—by no means bad—and several smudges of ink indicate that writing was a task she did not particularly relish" (xvi).

Testamentary evidence also shows that women such as Alyanore Hull owned manuscripts and frequently bequeathed them to other women. On the continent at this time books were considered part of a woman's *gerade*—the household goods she would normally inherit from her mother, such as "geese, small farm animals, beds, household furniture, linens, clothing, [and] kitchen utensils" (Bell 155). M. B. Parkes has suggested to me that the "residue" of an estate in England was likewise likely to contain the books; thus, he argues, books are likely to be mentioned in wills only when they are bequeathed separately from the residue. So testamentary evidence of book ownership will reveal exceptions and special cases, not the great majority of book inheritance. Such a situation parallels the case in Germany, where all books connected with pious matters were expected to be inherited by women: "alle Bucher die zum Gottedienste gehore [sic]" and "Bucher die Fraue phlege zu lese [sic]" (Bell 157).

Indeed, all the mentions of books I have yet found in women's wills specify bequests to testators other than the daughters who would receive the remenaunt. Elizabeth, Lady Clare, left all her books to the foundation of Clare College, Cambridge, in 1360 (LaFarge 92). In 1395 Lady Alice West left "a peyre Matyns bookis" to her son Thomas and "a masse book, and alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, englisch, and frensch" to her daughter-in-law Johane (Furnivall 5). Lady Peryne

Clanbowe in 1422 left a massbook to her brother, Sir Robert Whitney, and "a booke of Englyssh, cleped 'pore caytife'" to Elizabeth Joye (Furnivall 49–50). The will of Eleanor Purdeley of London lists "libros Anglicanos, videlicet the Storie of Josep [sic], Patrikek [sic] purgatore, and þe sermon of altqyne" in 1433 (Furnivall 2). Manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* frequently descend on the distaff side, suggesting that this great but difficult religio-political poem was considered suitable for female readers; the first known owner of a copy of the poem, William Palmere, received it from a woman (Wood). Deanesly (220–24; 335–43) presents evidence that Wycliffite Bibles and related materials were also bequeathed from woman to woman.<sup>5</sup>

Another canonical assumption about medieval women is that they owned only illustrated manuscripts, since they could not be expected to read the texts. Again the actual physical evidence presents another picture; manuscripts which bear traces of passing through women's hands frequently are without illustration. Sometimes there are scribal colophons to show us these passings, but more often the evidence takes the form of *ex libris* or *ex dono* inscriptions telling us who owned the manuscript and approximately when. The Simeon Manuscript, made around 1400 and intimately related to the great Vernon Manuscript, may have been compiled for Joan Bohun, grandmother of Henry V, and was eventually owned by an "Awdri Norwood."<sup>6</sup> Its contents range widely, from devotional treatises and religious lyrics to romances and contemporary political poetry. Like the Vernon Manuscript it was made for an audience with wide-ranging tastes and multi-lingual ability; the contents of both are in English, French, and Latin, and the decoration of Vernon may also indicate a feminine audience. A. I. Doyle argues that

an amply-grounded presumption, in England and throughout Europe at this time in the later middle ages, would be that any collection of vernacular

religious literature of comparable scope was probably made for nuns or other devout women ( anchoresses, vowesses or ladies of similar piety and spiritual counsel). (Vernon 14)

Doyle admits that some items in the massive manuscript may indicate lay, male, or mixed readership, but identifies several religious communities of appropriate size and resources to commission Vernon. Moreover, he adduces the case of the related University College Oxford MS. 97, whose scribe regularly dropped the phrase "or womman" from texts where Vernon retains it, to suggest that the earlier Vernon was designed for woman readers (9, 14–15).

There are many other extant examples of manuscripts which passed through the hands of women; the following selection will suggest their variety. The mid fifteenth-century Bodley MS. Ex musaeo 23, a copy of the Middle English religious prose compilation *Aventure and Grace*, came to the ownership of one Thomas Kyngwood in the late fifteenth century "ex dono magistra Anne Bulkeley." Whoever this learned lady was, she owned more than one book, for an autograph prayer signed by her survives in BL MS. Harley 494, and her descendant, Katherine Bulkeley, inherited that manuscript as Abbess of Godstowe around 1533. Another Bodley manuscript, Ex musaeo 232, a compilation made by John Flemmy[n]g of Rolle's meditation on the passion, Gregory on humility, the *Mirror of St. Edmond*, and a number of prayers, bears the ownership marks of two women. An 'Annes Helperby' signed her name several times as owner; and another woman, 'Elyzabeth Stoughton,' also recorded her name. Bodley MS. Laud misc. 416, a miscellany of devotional materials and Middle English poetry, was owned by two nuns of Sion, Anne Colyvylle and Clemencia Thaseburght (Doyle, *A Survey* 2:44). Bodley MS. Rawlinson C. 882, a copy of the *Pore Caitiff*, bears two ownership inscriptions by women: the slightly awkward "Iste liber constat Domina Margarete



Erloy, cum magno gaudio et honore Ihesu Christi”, and the more pragmatic “iste liber constat Domina Agnese Lye[ll]; hoo thys boke stelyth, schall have cryst curse and myne.” Bodley MS. misc. liturg. 104, made around 1340, is a handsome Latin Psalter with late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century prayers added in Latin, English, and French. Latin prayers to St. Anne and St. Christopher led Frederic Madan to conclude that the manuscript “had passed into the hands of a husband and wife named Christopher and Anna” (fol. ii<sup>v</sup>). And indeed the name of an Anne is preserved in the manuscript; “Anne Cobell” wrote her name in an early fifteenth-century script near the end of the Psalter (fol. 110<sup>v</sup>). The ink and inscription very much resemble the handwriting of some of the added prayers, but seven letter forms are not enough to argue with confidence that Anne herself copied some of this material.

One last Bodley manuscript shows with some clarity how fifteenth-century manuscripts passed from woman to woman. Bodley MS. Hatton 73 contains Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and short English poems by Chaucer and Lydgate, along with a few Latin prayers. Its first identifiable owner, if we can correctly decipher its confusing sequence of ownership inscriptions, was a woman named “Katherine,” who wrote a few Latin phrases in a mid fifteenth-century hand (fol. 122<sup>v</sup>). Then we find “This is my lady more boke. And sumtym it was Quene Margarete boke” (fol. 121<sup>v</sup>). The Queen Margaret in question is likely Margaret of Anjou (1430–82), queen to Henry VI, whose role as patroness of learning is well known. Another inscription tells us that Lady More was “domina margareta more” (1505–44), daughter of Sir Thomas More. From her the book passed to “domina elyzaabeth wyndesore” (fol. 1<sup>r</sup>). This lady, yet another colophon tells us “quod Clarke,” died on January 18, 1513 (fol. 123<sup>v</sup>), and the book then passed to Gartrude Powlet (fol. 1<sup>r</sup>). According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the Mores’s home in Chelsea passed to Sir William Paulet,

first Marquis of Winchester, in 1537, in return for Paulet’s services as one of More’s judges. Gartrude, undoubtedly one of Sir William’s kinswomen, and a woman named ‘Marya’ leave their signatures in the book as well (fol. 9<sup>v</sup>). Here we have an instance of a book passing from middle-class woman to royalty to gentry, documented chiefly in the women’s own hands.

These instances could probably be easily duplicated by any scholar examining a fairly representative collection of late Middle English manuscripts. But once one decides to look for such information, evidence of women’s participation in the manuscript culture appears with increasing regularity. A Huntington Library manuscript of Hoccleve and Lydgate (HM EL 26.A.13) contains the handwriting of Elyzabeth Gaynesford and the draft of the beginning of a letter to her sister (fol. 3<sup>v</sup>). The elaborate Ellesmere psalter (HM EL 9.H.17) was commissioned by a woman for other women; its colophon records that “domina isabella de vernun dedit istud psalterium conventum de hampul;” and a miniature of Lady Isabella presenting the Psalter to the Virgin and Child is included. A processional of the late fourteenth century (HM EL 34.B.7) is marked “This booke longeth to Dame Margery Byrkenhed of Chestre” (fol. 85<sup>v</sup>).

The Huntington Library also includes one of the most remarkable instances indicating a woman’s ownership of a manuscript. HM 136 is a rather common manuscript of *The Brut*, covering events up to 1422. But what distinguishes it is the evidence of its ownership by a Mistress Dorothy Helbartun. She signs her name or initials not once, not twice, but more than sixty times. She comes alive again as one turns the pages and finds evidence of her—and of some “servant” of hers—asserting across the years her delight and pride in ownership. She begins simply enough with her initials and short inscriptions such as “dorethe helbartun’s boke” but branches out to such variations as “Be yt known to al men thys ys dorethes boke;” “God save her that do owe thys

boke, DH"; "Thys ys dorethe helbartun boke And she wyll apon yu loke"; and the aggressively assertive "Wyll yow say thys ys not mystrys dorethes boke? Then yow lye." She even tells us how she obtained it: "Mystrys Barnarde gave her thys boke"; and "Who gave her thys boke? Mare her mother." A servant—perhaps even a suitor—assisted her, recording among other assertions that "I am he that wyll here recorde thys ys my mystrys buke." Ironically, in keeping with the Index of Middle English Prose's bibliographical policy, Ralph Hanna III's admirable handlist of the Huntington manuscripts does not mention any authorship marks in the volume. Dorothy's reaction to such an omission can only be imagined.

Clearly, then, when we put aside our conditioned critical assumption that English women did not participate in the manuscript culture of their world, and look at the manuscripts themselves, we find a different picture from what we had been led to expect. It is clear that some English women, like some English men, did compose literary and didactic works; and, as in the case of their male counterparts, we are fortunate when a woman writer's name is preserved for us. We know that social pretensions aside, women of the upper middle class could and did write letters on subjects ranging from the extremely personal to the moderately larcenous. We know that women inherited Middle English manuscripts containing works at all levels of sophistication; that the contents of these ranged widely, including not only devotional material but poetry and history, in both English and the more "learned" languages of French and Latin. Women considered manuscripts prize possessions, and made dispositions of them, frequently to other women, in their wills. We know too that they indicated their pride of possession in manuscript ownership not only with their signatures but with anathemas against dispossessors. They called themselves *domina* and *magistra*, appellations which attested to their perception of their learning. In short, these women thought of themselves as learned, as

participants in a world of reading, writing, and manuscript production.

It is difficult to establish from the surviving records just what percentage of the English population—male and female—could read and write at this period. We know as little about education in this period as we do at any time in English history. We do not know if the alleged "unlettered" condition of women referred to all kinds of learning, or whether, as has been speculated, it meant a decline in the reading of French and all but rudimentary Latin.<sup>7</sup> We do not know why the incidence of women's letters and signatures seems to increase in the 1440s, and why that increase continues throughout the century. All of these areas require further serious inquiry by scholars not only of literature but of history, economics, and gender theory as well. But we know enough to assume that when we talk about reading and writing in England, particularly in the fifteenth century, we have to mention women more than four times, to look not only at Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe but beyond, to assume that some women authors lived and worked in the period between Margery and Queen Elizabeth. We need to ask not if English women *were* readers and writers, but *what* they read and wrote. In short, we can no longer be content with mouthing the canonical misperceptions of the past; we have to extend the literary and literate history of the late English Middle Ages to include women as well as men.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Twenty-Second International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, 1987. My first acquaintance with many of the manuscripts I discuss here came contemporaneously with my first acquaintance with Judson Allen, in Oxford in the summer of 1983. Those discussions and Judson's friendship remain a great source of inspiration to me. I am deeply indebted to Professor Germaine Greer, then of the University of Tulsa, for providing me with a Tulsa Center

for the Study of Women's Literature Summer Bursary that enabled me to work in Bodley. The manuscripts in the Huntington Library were examined with the generous assistance of a Rutgers University Faculty Summer Research Grant. I am especially indebted to Professors M. B. Parkes, Jeanne Krochalis, and George R. Keiser for suggestions useful in the development of this paper.

2. To begin to appreciate the confusion that surrounds this issue, one need only consult the very different accounts in Orme 52-55 and Ferrante 9-42. It may well be that economic historians will provide the key to understanding this complex situation.

3. Among the many surveys of Julian's learning, a recent concise account may be found in Jones 272-74.

4. I am indebted for knowledge of the Spencer manuscript to Professor Rosemarie McGerr of Yale University, who is preparing an edition of the *Pilgrimage of the Soul*.

5. George Kane first made the suggestion about *Piers Plowman* manuscripts to me. J. I. Catto has been studying the bequests of manuscripts in women's wills; when his work appears it will undoubtedly shed further light on this subject.

6. A. I. Doyle, "Introduction" 15-16. Doyle's identification of "Awdri Norwood" as an Elizabethan signature (16) would seem to negate Janet Coleman's argument that this woman was a contemporary kinswoman of the Cistercian poet/compiler John Northwood (Coleman 78).

7. M. B. Parkes has advanced the latter opinion in "The Literacy of the Laity" 555-77.

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