

Monasticisms Medieval and Early Modern

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Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 416 is a mid-fifteenth century manuscript containing a compilation of texts. It opens with part two of *Peter Idley's Instructions to His Son*, which draws upon John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. This is followed by Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, a text that has been called Lydgate's most political poem.¹ After the *Siege* comes Lydgate and Benet Burgh's *Secrets of Old Philosophers*, a text that purports to be a letter from Aristotle to Alexander the Great covering topics "from ethical and political advice, to prescriptions for diet and hygiene, to astrological lore."² Laud Misc. 416 additionally includes the universal history *Cursor mundi* and John Clifton's translation of Vegetius's treatise, *De re militari*. The final text in the manuscript is an imperfect version of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*.³ The works in Laud Misc. 416 thus comprise a fairly tidy thematic package; as David Lorenzo Boyd notes, the texts attend to "socio-political discourse" emphasizing common profit.⁴

Who, though, was the audience for this compilation? The manuscript bears a scribal notation dated October 25, 1459, indicating that it was "Scriptus . . . per Iohannis Neuton." M. C. Seymour identifies the scribe as "the Benedictine Johannes Nuton, recorded at Battle from 1463 and later prior of the cell at Exeter" and indicates that the manuscript may have been "a household book of the Tiptoft family."⁵ This suggestion is plausible, since a collection of texts concerned with sociopolitical discourse and the common profit would have been a logical addition to the library of this prosperous, politically well-connected family. John Tiptoft, first Baron Tiptoft (ca. 1378–1443), was speaker of the House of Commons in 1406 and participated in diplomatic activities at the Council of Constance.⁶ His son John Tiptoft, first Earl of Worcester (1427–1470), during whose lifetime Laud Misc. 416 was produced, also held important political positions. He was treasurer of England from April 1452 until October 1454, and under

Edward IV he held a series of high offices. Though he earned a reputation as a shrewd, even merciless, politician, he was also “renowned for his learning and his love of books.”⁷

Though the contents of Laud Misc. 416 suit it well for the presumed interests of members of the Tiptoft family, and though the younger John Tiptoft was a serious collector of books, the manuscript did not remain in the family’s possession (assuming Seymour’s suggestion that it was a Tiptoft household book is correct). Rather, though we do not know precisely when or how, it ended up in the library of the Brigittine nuns of Syon, a library separate from that of the Syon brethren. Given that the names of two Syon nuns (Anne Colville and Clemencia Thraseborough) were inscribed in the manuscript in the period between 1518 and 1531, it seems reasonable to believe that at least some of the nuns actually read the manuscript.⁸

That a manuscript of medieval texts focused on the common profit evidently passed from the hands of an influential English family into the hands of the early modern nuns of Syon raises several issues that are central to the essays that comprise this special issue of *JMEMS*, “Monasticisms Medieval and Early Modern.” That early modern nuns were reading medieval works highlights, for a start, the ongoing importance of medieval texts and practices in early modern monastic cultures. Putting the medieval and the early modern in conversation with each other is a fundamental aim of this issue, even as contributors revise understandings of “medieval” and “early modern” as discrete periods.

The inscriptions of Anne Colville’s and Clemencia Thraseborough’s names in Laud Misc. 416 lead us to consider the nature of monastic textual cultures and the involvement of religious women and men in textual networks, topics that feature in several contributors’ essays. Equally, the unanswered question of *how* Laud Misc. 416 passed from secular hands into those of the Brigittine nuns invites examination of the relationships that existed among those in religion and those in the world, as well as of the ways in which such relationships shaped monastic cultures, topics taken up in several essays.

The political valence of the texts in Laud Misc. 416 draws our attention to the political engagements of later medieval and early modern monastic institutions. In essays in this issue, we encounter, for instance, men and women religious involved in the political affairs of English and Castilian monarchs as well as in ongoing efforts to define the heterodox and the orthodox. That Brigittine nuns were reading politically inflected texts by such canonical mainstays as Chaucer and Lydgate (texts we likely would not

today view as dealing with straightforwardly religious subject matter) also points toward the complexities of monastic identities and of the modes of their formations, topics that recur throughout this issue.

More generally, the perhaps unexpected presence of a compilation of didactic, politically oriented texts in the Syon nuns' library prompts us to rethink a variety of conceptual boundaries that have shaped studies of medieval and early modern history, literature, and religion. Contributors accordingly treat not only the walls of monastic enclosures and the confines of religious orders, but also disciplinary, temporal, and national borders, as being highly permeable. In short, the scene of early sixteenth-century English nuns reading Chaucer, Lydgate, and Vegetius that Laud Misc. 416 calls to mind provides an appropriate jumping-off point to explore the ways in which medieval and early modern monastic foundations, and the forms of cultural production associated with them, were complexly imbricated in a variety of far-reaching, intersecting systems.

Thinking about the contents of the Syon nuns' library highlights the importance of texts as monastic cultural productions *par excellence* and recalls the fact that monastic literacy, particularly nuns' literacy, has received considerable critical attention in recent years.⁹ The bookish Brigitines have come in for special consideration, and Mary Erler's essay included here focuses on textual cultures and reading practices at Syon. Erler examines the ways in which Continental theological and devotional ideas made their way into English culture via a textual network involving English Catholic exiles in the Low Countries, a network in which Syon played an important role. Her analysis focuses particularly on William Perryn's *Spirituell Exercyses*, a text strongly influenced by Ignatian and Netherlandish spirituality and dedicated to both Katherine Palmer of Syon and Dorothy Clement, a Poor Clare, who were among the first English members of the Louvain diaspora.

Contributors also address the reading, writing, and circulating of texts by religious women and men in a variety of other monastic orders. Nicky Hallett considers the ways in which early modern English Carmelite nuns represent time in their spiritual self-writings and in the accounts of their corporate history. She analyzes texts produced by nuns in English Carmelite foundations on the Continent alongside texts written by the Discalced founder-reformer, Teresa de Jesus of Avila, whose ideas were themselves shaped in response to Augustine's theories of temporality.

Claire Jones's essay sheds new light on the important topic of nuns' Latin literacy, focusing on manuscripts from Observant Dominican con-

vents in southern Germany. These manuscripts present hymns in multiple formats: in their poetic form with Latin interlinear glosses, in versions with word order rearranged and with German equivalents following Latin terms, and in German prose. Jones argues that the Latin language was being taught to nuns in these Observant communities using these translated hymnaries. She also argues that nuns' Latin literacy was important to Dominican reformist aims, because the nuns' in-depth comprehension of the liturgical ritual enriched their understanding of their place in their community, in the Dominican order, and in the Church writ large.

As Jones's consideration of the relationships between male Dominican reformers and Dominican nuns in southern Germany makes clear, the interactions of female and male religious were an important feature of monastic life. Such interactions are central to Erin Jordan's essay. Jordan argues that Cistercian theory and practice concerning the claustration of nuns were at odds in thirteenth-century France. Evidence from monastic charters reveals that violations of active and passive claustration did not in fact greatly concern the nuns themselves, their ecclesiastical supervisors, or their secular patrons. Contrary to received scholarly opinion, the implementation of the papal bull *Periculoso* in 1294 was thus not particularly detrimental to these female communities. Jordan demonstrates that enclosure was, though, a useful tool for Cistercian monks and ecclesiastical officials to wield to differentiate Cistercian nuns from emergent groups of potentially heretical beguines.

Jordan's claim that distinctive modes of religious life could have symbolic value with attendant material and political dimensions certainly holds true for Syon. Henry V's founding of Syon played, as I have argued elsewhere, a key symbolic role in his efforts to legitimate both Lancastrian rule in England and the English claim to the throne of France.¹⁰ The Brigittine order was not, however, alone in offering symbolic assets to monarchs and causes, something that Elizabeth Lehfeltd's essay makes clear. Taking an innovatively comparative approach, Lehfeltd examines the political stakes of monastic reform efforts in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Castile and England. In addition to revisiting the issue of nuns' literacy to explore the ways in which these reform programs treat nuns' reading abilities and their access to texts, Lehfeltd, like Jordan, attends to ecclesiastical treatments of enclosure for women religious. While Jordan's essay explores the role enclosure plays in the ecclesiastical politics of defining heterodox and orthodox groups, Lehfeltd's essay examines the ways in which emphasis, or lack of emphasis, on female monastic enclosure illuminates the interplay of

gender and religion in the development of the English and Castilian states between 1450 and 1540.

Monastic political involvement also went well beyond the symbolic realm in the medieval and early modern periods. For instance, the community of Syon was intimately engaged in working for the English Catholic cause from the time of the Dissolution through the seventeenth century. Indeed, the level of Syon's political participation makes the politically inflected texts collected in *Laud Misc.* 416 in some ways as good a fit for the Brigittines' library as for the Tiptoft family's library. Syon was, though, by no means unique as a monastic community closely involved in high-level international political affairs. Claire Walker's essay reveals that English nuns living in the Low Countries in the mid-seventeenth century played fundamentally important roles in English Royalist activities. The English Benedictine nunnery at Ghent was especially engaged, serving as a "clearing house" for intelligence. As Walker demonstrates, the nuns recorded and circulated accounts of daily convent life that intersected with contemporary political events, and in doing so they facilitated the evolution of such new, politically important textual forms as newsletters and mercuries.

Peter Low's contribution extends the examination of expressions of monastic identity and the politics of monastic cultural production into the realm of material culture and the built environment. He considers the peculiar character of innovation in monastic art in the early twelfth century and interrogates the specifically monastic concerns that may have motivated this under-acknowledged desire for invention. His essay focuses on the relationship between the early twelfth-century main portal at the Cluniac abbey of Vézelay and a number of Anglo-Saxon manuscript illuminations, produced in the monastic scriptorium at Winchester in the tenth century. He argues that the makers of the portal at Vézelay, in a triangular process of creation, drew on the earlier Anglo-Saxon imagery as well as on a number of biblical texts to celebrate tradition, and, at the same time, to create something that was consciously new. This innovative yet still traditional art was designed to capture the attention of its audiences aesthetically as well as intellectually, thereby justifying its presence in a monastic setting.

Analysis of the politico-cultural implications of forms and expressions of monastic identity also lies at the heart of Katherine Ziemann's contribution. Ziemann explores the rhetoric of self-representation and conceptions of audience in the writings of the fifteenth-century Carthusian monk Richard Methley. Considering Methley's little-studied Latin texts (which were evidently intended for a monastic audience, despite the Carthusians'

reputation as disseminators of vernacular religious texts to lay audiences), and comparing those texts with the writings of Methley's influential model Richard Rolle, Zieman examines the ways in which Methley approaches relationships between self and community. She analyzes the ways in which he negotiates between the contemplative and active lives, creating a paradoxical identity as a "public contemplative."

Work on monasticism is, for medievalists, perhaps among the most traditional of scholarly pursuits. For early modernists who study northern Europe where Protestantism exercised the strongest cultural force, monasticism is a subject frequently passed over, especially by those who work on England, who tend to proceed as though the official dissolution of monastic foundations spelled the end of English monastic cultures. The essays in this special issue of *JMEMS* seek to change both of these states of affairs. They illustrate innovative approaches to well-studied topics, and they break new scholarly ground, attending to communities, texts, and modes of political action that have received little consideration. In doing so, the contributors make clear that, far from being either so mainstream as to be dull or so marginal as to be irrelevant, monasticisms both medieval and early modern were in these earlier periods sources of cultural energy, aesthetic innovation, and political power and are now fields of study that enable the development of new perspectives on religion, literature, and history.



Notes

- 1 Derek Pearsall, "Lydgate as Innovator," *Modern Language Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1992): 15.
- 2 Charles F. Briggs, *Giles of Rome's "De Regimine Principum": Reading and Writing Politics at Court and University, c. 1275–c. 1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 21.
- 3 This version of the *Parliament of Fowls* includes lines 1–142. M. C. Seymour indicates that at least eight folios are lost after folio 289, so Laud Misc. 416 most likely originally contained the full text of the poem. See *A Catalogue of Chaucer Manuscripts, Volume 1: Works before the "Canterbury Tales"* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 25.
- 4 David Lorenzo Boyd, "Compilation as Commentary: Controlling Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (1992): 952.
- 5 Seymour, *Catalogue of Chaucer Manuscripts*, 26
- 6 Linda Clark, "Tiptoft, John, first Baron Tiptoft (c. 1378–1443)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew, Brian Harrison, and Lawrence Goldman, online edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004–12), <http://www.oxforddnb.com> (accessed May 8, 2012).

- 7 Benjamin G. Kohl, "Tiptoft, John, first earl of Worcester (1427–1470)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 8 Anne Colville "was a nun of Syon in 1518," and she died October 30, 1531. Clemencia Thraseborough appears "in the 1518 list of Syon nuns"; she died March 13, 1536. See David Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 190 and 195.
- 9 See, for instance, Bell, *What Nuns Read*; Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002); Mary C. Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 10 See Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

