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LEADERSHIP IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH NUNNERIES

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LEADERSHIP IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH NUNNERIES

The position of an abbess or prioress in the middle ages was one of great responsibility, with care for both the spiritual and economic welfare of her convent. This book considers the power wielded by and available to such women. It addresses leadership models, questions of social identity and the varying perceptions of the role and performance of the abbess or prioress via a close examination of the records of sixteen female houses in the period from 1280 to 1540; the large range of documentary evidence used includes selections from episcopal registers, account rolls, plea rolls, Chancery documents, letters, petitions, medieval literature and comparative material from additional nunneries. The theme of conflict recurs throughout, as religious women are revealed steering their communities between the directives of the church and the demands of their budgets or their secular neighbours. The Dissolution and its effects on the morale and behaviour of the last superiors conclude the study.

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Abbreviations

Aungier	G.J. Aungier, *The History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery* (London, 1840)
BI	Borthwick Institute
BL	British Library
Bodl.	Bodleian Library
Bowles & Nichols	W.L. Bowles & J.G. Nichols, *Annals and Antiquities of Lacock Abbey* (London, 1835)
CCR	Calendar of Close Rolls
Ch	charter
Coldicott	D. Coldicott, *Hampshire Nunneries* (Chichester, 1989)
CPL	*Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland, Papal Letters*
CPR	*Calendar of Patent Rolls*
Cross & Vickers	C. Cross & N. Vickers, eds, *Monks, Friars and Nuns in the Sixteenth Century*,Yorkshire Archaeological Society 150 (1995)
CUL	Cambridge University Library
Dioc. Vis.	A. Hamilton Thompson, ed., *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln, 1517–31*, 3 vols, Lincoln Record Society 33, 35, 37 (1940–7)
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
Dugdale, *Mon.*	W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 6 vols in 8 (London, 1846)
EETS	Early English Text Society
Eklund	S. Eklund, ed., *Sancta Birgitta Opera Minoris I. Regula Salvatoris* (Stockholm, 1975)
es	extra series
GL	Guildhall Library
Heads	D.M. Smith & V.C.M. London, *Heads of Religious Houses, England and Wales* ii (Cambridge, 2001)
HRO	Hampshire Record Office
JEH	*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
Knowles & Hadcock	D. Knowles & R.N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* (New York, 1971)
Kock	E.A. Kock, ed. & trans., *Three Middle-English Versions of the Rule of St Benet*, EETS os 120 (1902)
l.	line

LAC	K.H. Rogers, ed., *Lacock Abbey Charters* (Devizes, 1979)
LAO	Lincoln Archives Office
Linc. Vis.	A. Hamilton Thompson, ed., *Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln* [1420–49], 3 vols, Canterbury & York Society 17, 24, 33 (1969)
Liveing	H.G.D. Liveing, *Records of Romsey Abbey 907–1558* (London, 1912)
L&P	Great Britain Public Record Office, *Letters and Papers Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* (1862–1932)
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
McCann, *RB*	J. McCann, ed. & trans., *The Rule of St Benedict* (London, 1963)
m	membrane
os	old series
PRO	Great Britain Public Record Office
Reg.	register
RP	*Rotuli Parliamentorum*
Sharpe, *Wills*	R. R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting*, 2 vols (London, 1889–90)
SS	Surtees Society
Sturman	W. Sturman, 'The History of the Nunnery of St Mary and St Michael Outside Stamford', unpublished MA dissertation, University of London (1945)
TE	*Taxatio Ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae*, Great Britain Record Commission (1802)
Test. Ebor.	J. Raine et al., eds, *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 6 vols, SS 4, 30, 45, 53, 79, 106 (1836–1902)
TNA: PRO	The National Archives: Public Record Office
VCH	Victoria County History
VE	*Valor Ecclesiasticus temp. Henry VIII*, 6 vols, ed. J. Caley, Great Britain Record Commission (1810–34)
WAM	*Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural Historical Magazine*
WRO	Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office
YAJ	*Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*
YAS	*Yorkshire Archaeological Society*

Glossary

Benefice: (in ecclesiastical context) A living endowed to an individual serving the church in some manner.

Comperta: The summary of the findings of an ecclesiastical visitor assessing a religious establishment.

Convocation: An assemblage of the clergy.

Corrody: Provision for personal maintenance, often in the form of a retirement 'package', either bought in advance from the host establishment or provided free of charge (often in response to the request or demand of the monarch).

Crosier: The staff of office carried by a religious leader such as a bishop or head of a monastery.

Custos: An official appointed to assist with the administration of the house as a custodian.

Detecta: Faults detected in the course of an assessment of a religious establishment.

Devise: To bequeath.

Distaff: A simple tool used for spinning. The distaff has become a symbol for feminine industry and responsibility.

Distrain: To constrain or force a person by the seizure of property to perform some obligation, or to punish by such a seizure for non-performance of an obligation.

Excommunicate: To exclude by an authoritative sentence from the communion of the Church, or from religious rites.

Frankpledge: The system by which every member of a tithing was answerable for the behaviour of any one of the other members. View of frankpledge: Inspection of a gathering of the citizens in the group of ten (tithing). In cases where the tithing attendance was incomplete, a penalty was exacted by the person in authority over the group.

In chief: Applied to a tenancy held immediately from the Lord Paramount. (In medieval England, usually referred to property held directly from the king).

Inspeximus: Literally, 'We have inspected'. Commonly used by the monarch in relation to charters. Heads of religious establishments often requested the king to inspect charters made by his forebears and vouch for their continuing validity.

Interdict: A restraint issued by a person in authority against doing or using something, or exercising a customary right.

Messuage: Portion of land intended as site for a dwelling house and its outbuildings.

Mortmain: Literally, 'dead hand'. A legal term derived from the French. The condition of property held in perpetuity by an ecclesiastical or other corporation. **Amortisation**: the act of alienating lands in mortmain.

Nolumus (clause): Literally, 'We do not wish'. Usually, a royal statement.

Novice: One who has entered a religious house and is under probation.

Oyer et terminer: A legal term for a writ of commission directing royal officials to hear and determine indictments on treasons, felonies, etc.

Postulant: A candidate for admission into a religious house.

Prebend: Pension, pittance or church living.

Procuration: The provision of entertainment or a fee, for a bishop or other ecclesiastical visitor by a religious establishment.

Quitclaim: The renunciation of a right or claim.

Reredos: An ornamental screen covering the wall at the back of an altar.

Scutage: A tax levied out of knight's fees; but commonly a tax paid in lieu of military service.

Temporalities: Temporal or material possessions.

Introduction

This book is an examination of the medieval English nunnery superior as a power broker. It addresses questions of social identity, models of leadership, and perceptions of the role and performance of the abbess or prioress in secular and religious spheres.[1] Although several historians have studied English medieval nunneries in various contexts, there has been no attempt as yet to focus specifically on the individual elected to lead her house. The role of the medieval abbess or prioress allowed the exercise of independent authority by a woman, in an era noted for its subjugation of females and for its schizoid view of them as either temptresses or saints. This woman, whether in an abbey or priory, bore responsibility not only for spiritual leadership, but also for the maintenance and exploitation of convent property.[2]

The image of the worldly and ineffectual medieval nun, deliniated progressively by Eileen Power in *Medieval English Nunneries* and *Medieval People* and recycled by later historians, has been challenged directly or implicitly by a number of scholars.[3] John Tillotson's pamphlet on Marrick Priory, for example, reveals careful and, perhaps, sacrificial management of resources by the community during a period when reduced demand for land meant declining income for many monasteries.[4] Catherine Paxton's dissertation on London nunneries not only questions the negative stereotype of the nun *per se*, but also argues convincingly that secular folk valued the London nuns for their intercessory function.[5] In addition, Joan Greatrex and Yvonne Parrey provide insights into the devotional life of convents and the use made of formational texts which were often donated by pious secular folk and later shared with their sisters in the community. These studies reveal aspects of

1 The head of a female abbey was referred to as 'abbess'; that of a priory or smaller nunnery, a 'prioress'. The latter term is also applied to the superior's deputy in an abbey.

2 For a summary of duties performed by nunnery superiors see M. Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 76–9.

3 E. Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275–1535* (Cambridge, 1922); *Medieval People* (New York, 1924).

4 J. Tillotson, *Marrick Priory: A Nunnery in Late Medieval Yorkshire*, Borthwick Paper 75 (1989).

5 C. Paxton, 'The Nunneries of London and its Environs in the later Middle Ages', unpublished DPhil dissertation, University of Oxford (1992). See pages 103–35 for a detailed discussion of legacies to nuns and also chantry foundations administered by nunneries.

convent management which suggest alternative views of the nunnery superior.[6]

Recent feminist literature has examined the social parameters which helped determine the level of autonomy achieved by medieval women, addressing the broad question of female power and external attitudes to such power during the Middle Ages. These studies provide useful background to the leadership question. Susan Stuard identifies a change in collective attitudes to female authority from the twelfth century, when the exercise of power by women began to be termed 'manly' or 'exceptional'.[7] This attitudinal shift is explained in terms of a re-awakened notion of polarity between the sexes, promoted by scholars influenced by Galen and, later, Gratian.[8] Further, it is argued that such a notion of polarity had become by the fourteenth century a hardened assumption, manifested in the exclusion of females from educational institutions which would otherwise have given them a forum for attacking beliefs of this kind.[9]

Roberta Gilchrist contributes evidence which lends further support to feminist theories on the repression of women exercising authority in the public sphere. These data include a set of charts showing population and annual income calculated in 1535 and revealing that fifty percent of all English Benedictine nuns in that year had a total net income of less than £5 per head, while only about five percent of male religious from the same order lived at that level.[10] Such figures give a clear indication of priorities in a society whose males controlled the bulk of property.

Caroline Barron and Anne Sutton have studied urban widows in medieval London, another discrete group of women.[11] Their work brings together a number of essays examining the challenges met by individuals, mainly from the mercantile class. These discussions offer insights not only into female power, but also into aspects of piety, educational aspirations, patronage and the surveillance of late medieval women. In her examination of fourteenth-century conventual life at Dartford Priory, Nancy Bradley Warren remarks

6 J. Greatrex, 'On Ministering to "certayne devoute and religiouse women": Bishop Fox and the Benedictine Nuns of Winchester Diocese on the Eve of the Dissolution', in *Women in the Church: Papers Read at the 1989 Summer Meeting and the 1990 Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, *Studies in Church History* 27, eds W.J. Sheils and D. Wood (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 227–8; Y. Parrey, ' "Examples and Instrumentes of Vertues": Vernacular Books and the Formation of English Nuns', unpublished PhD thesis, The Australian National University (Canberra, 1996), p. 332.

7 S.M. Stuard, 'The Dominion of Gender: Women's Fortunes in the High Middle Ages', in *Becoming Visible*, 2nd edn, eds R. Bridenthal, C. Koonz & S. Stuard (Boston, 1987), p. 158.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 165–9.

10 R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: the Archaeology of Religious Women* (London, 1994), p. 44.

11 C.M. Barron & A.F. Sutton, eds, *Medieval London Widows 1300–1500* (London, 1994), pp. xxxiii, xxxiv.

on the nuns' experience of both constraint and empowerment: a reminder of the delicate balance demanded of the nun and thus, the superior.[12]

There is no doubt that all nunnery histories reflect to some extent the service of abbesses and prioresses, who were held ultimately responsible for all areas of life in their houses. Indeed, blame was attributed to superiors when problems surfaced, though praise was routinely denied. However, many sources which describe convent activities fail to divulge the nature and extent of personal involvement by individual women, whether in business transactions, management of staff, formulation of petitions, litigation, discipline of the community, or worship.

Documentary evidence of all these areas of the superior's life and work offers clues to the attitudes and initiatives of the one in charge. Such evidence does not yield up its secrets readily; indeed, in many cases it is necessary to read the material both at its face value and also 'against the grain' to arrive at some understanding of the challenges faced by the women and their manner of wielding power.

While nunneries were in general poorer than the male monasteries, there were considerable variations between individual female houses in terms of finance, location, level of community support and secular pressures. All of these factors influenced the nature of the superiors' leadership responsibilities and helped determine outcomes. In order to ground this study on a firm base offering potential for comparison and contrast, a core of material drawn from the records of sixteen nunneries has been used. Data relating to several convents outside the core group have also been consulted for additional comparison.

The term 'leadership' is modern rather than medieval; nevertheless, it is a word which resonates with today's scholars and describes clearly the role of the convent superior. All but one of the selected nunneries were subject to the Benedictine or the Augustinian *Rule*.[13] Syon Abbey functioned under the *Rule of St Augustine* with the *Rule of St Saviour* as its constitutions. The Brigittine *Rule* was created primarily for women, though it also provided directions for the male religious who supported the needs of the abbey while functioning in a physically separate area of the monastic complex.[14]

12 N.B. Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 2001), p. 3.

13 The core group whose superiors offer the main focus of this study are Canterbury St Sepulchre (Kent); Clementhorpe (Yorkshire); Clerkenwell (Middlesex); Davington (Kent); Esholt (Yorkshire); Godstow (Oxfordshire); Kington St Michael (Wiltshire); Lacock (Wiltshire); Marrick (Yorkshire); St Helen's (London); St Mary's Winchester (Hampshire); Romsey (Hampshire); St Michael Stamford (Northamptonshire); Stratford at Bowe (Middlesex); Syon (Middlesex); Wilton (Wiltshire). See Appendix A for further information on the nunneries selected.

14 The main texts used for this purpose are J. McCann, ed. & trans., *The Rule of St Benedict* (London, 1963); E. Kock, ed., *Three Middle-English Versions of the Rule of St Benet*, EETS os 120; Bodl. Arch. A.d. 15; *The Rule of Seynt Benet*, trans. Bishop Richard Fox,

The raw materials from which the model of the 'ideal' female superior can be constructed are to be found within these rules; from these the basic 'duty statement' of the abbess or prioress can be discerned. It becomes clear that the *Rule of St Benedict* required that the female superior follow a model incorporating the attributes of both authoritarianism and submission, normally regarded as opposite extremes. Similar requirements were set out in the *Rule* and constitutions guiding the superior of Syon.[15] This model was demanding enough but, given the additional expectations introduced by the secular world and sanctioned informally or otherwise by the church, it became both complex and onerous. While the early monasteries functioned as isolated, simple units, sufficiently funded (paradoxically) to allow their religious to engage in voluntary poverty and contemplation, the monasteries of the later period were subject to decisive changes. Political and social pressures forced religious to take responsibility for keeping their houses afloat financially, manage property, sue the recalcitrant, engage in building programs, and serve the secular community in a number of new areas including chantry management and teaching of the young. Thus the role of the convent superior was increasingly weighted with additional responsibilities which became virtual accretions to the *Rule* over time. The women's performance of these tasks was assessed by the episcopal authorities.

The male religious also found himself carrying an increasing burden of responsibility in the later Middle Ages, but his house was typically better-funded and he was less subservient and vulnerable to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Important distinguishing features of the male and female roles appear when the status of the superiors is compared, as Warren points out.[16] Not the least of these differences is apparent in the diffusion of spiritual authority through the appointment of a male chaplain for the nunnery community. Since this individual performed a function which was denied to the abbess or prioress, his place in the power network had a significant effect upon the ethos and function of the nunnery.

The complex power structure in which the female superior was placed is illustrated by two diagrams in Chapter 1, firstly drawn from an hierarchical perspective (fig. 1) and secondly (fig. 2) from the perspective of the female superior. These show the relative importance of the various authority figures, individuals and pressure groups, as well as the areas of activity governed by the *Rule* to which a given community adhered. As the double-pointed arrows

printed in 1517 by R. Pynson; S. Eklund, ed., *Sancta Birgitta Opera Minora I. Regula Salvatoris* (Stockholm, 1975); G.J. Aungier, *The History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery* (London, 1840). For 'Additions to the Rules' see Aungier's Appendix, pp. 249–404.

15 Syon Abbey functioned somewhat differently, being subject to both the Augustinian and Brigittine *Rules*, the latter supplying the practical guidelines for the house. The Brigittine system effectively gave Syon's abbess greater autonomy than that enjoyed by her counterparts in the other orders, but the diocesan still wielded considerable power over her. See *Victoria County History of Middlesex* i, pp. 182–5.

indicate, the prioress or abbess not only exerted power but experienced pressure from groups and individuals both within and outside the convent. Her perceptions of the varying levels of such power were not necessarily identical with those in authority over her.

The task of analysing and assessing the phenomenon of leadership and the execution of the superior's multi-faceted role has demanded a longitudinal approach, to observe the effects of social and religious changes. Since the bull *Periculoso* of 1298 proved a key determinant in the life of the female houses,[17] its date of promulgation offered a possible starting point for the project. However, the study reaches back to 1280 to establish the background to 'reform' legislation and thus include the period of Archbishop John Pecham's service, in view of his significance as a reformer. The year 1539 marks the conclusion of the book, signalling the end of official monastic life for the English nuns, though not necessarily the end of their commitment to religion. The availability of records is obviously a key determinant. Since most earliest surviving episcopal registers of the medieval period date from the second half of the thirteenth century, it would be difficult to find an adequate collection of sources to illuminate the period before 1280. Some of the primary source material cited here has been used by other scholars; however, this study calls for a different treatment of the evidence, with an emphasis on cause and effect rather than relative 'worthiness' of individuals or institutions.

While tracing the outline of the model or models placed before the convent superior there has also been a search for answers in several other areas, including identity, social status and personal attributes brought to the leadership role. The popular notion that nuns were typically drawn from the ranks of the ruling class is re-examined: an exercise already begun in recent works by historians including Marilyn Oliva, John Tillotson and Paul Lee.[18] In this context, the interpersonal relations within the house and links with the secular or religious community outside the convent are assessed, bearing in mind that these are issues which affected the shape and style of leadership within the convent. Testamentary material, particularly from the London area, offers important additional clues.[19] Evidence of election procedures also

16 Warren, *Spiritual Economies*, pp. 6–7, 14–23. Warren also compares the gendered implications of the application of the Benedictine, Franciscan and Brigittine *Rules*.

17 See J.H. Tillotson, 'Visitation and Reform of the Yorkshire Nunneries in the Fourteenth Century', *Northern History* 30 (1994), pp. 1–21, for a discussion on the implications of this bull in a local context.

18 M. Oliva, *The Convent and the Community*, pp. 52–60; Tillotson, *Marrick*, pp. 6–8; P. Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society* (York, 2001), pp. 57–67.

19 The following printed sources have been used to supplement testamentary material found in episcopal registers: J.W. Clay, ed., *North Country Wills* i, SS 116 (1908); C.W. Foster, ed., *Lincoln Wills registered in the district probate registry at Lincoln A.D. 1271–1526*, 3 vols, Lincoln Record Society 5, 10, 24 (1914–30); N.H. Nicolas,

adds perspective on the question of family links and the vicarious benefits sought by relatives of the superior.

Another area of investigation concerns the church's perception of the female superior's role and the level of support given by the religious hierarchy and, in particular, the local bishop. The inherent stresses of the relationship between the abbess or prioress and her ordinary are highlighted, together with evidence of mutual expectations. This sets the scene for a later discussion concerning some outcomes of this relationship and of the relationship between the superior and the spiritual and temporal monarchs, namely king and pope.

Obviously, the king was accorded a far more dominant role in the administration of a royal house, with royal demands for special favours such as corrodies and pensions occurring as part of the normal interaction between monarch and abbess.[20] Responses to applications of this kind are studied, in order to identify the attitudes of the women concerned. Comparisons are drawn between the king's and pope's relations with the poor and the more affluent houses.

Not surprisingly, the theme of conflict is a thread which runs through the whole of this study. The task of balancing distaff and crosier in the day-to-day management of convents reveals superiors forced to compromise between the dictates of the church and the demands of their budgets or their secular neighbours. A range of evidence including episcopal registers, account rolls, plea rolls, Chancery documents, letters and petitions is used to highlight the efforts of individual women striving to fulfil their financial responsibilities against daunting odds.

It has been important in this investigation to determine how the observers and critics of the female superior viewed her role and service; not surprisingly perhaps, the records show that perceptions of the female superior as spiritual guide, economic manager and disciplinarian varied according to the perspective of the onlooker. Since the male ecclesiastical fraternity monitored and assessed the women's service, their writings are examined for

Testamenta Vetusta, 2 vols (London, 1826); J. Raine et al., eds, *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 6 vols, SS 4, 30, 45, 53, 79, 106 (vol. 106 ed. J.W. Clay) (1836–1902); G.H. Fowler & H. Jenkinson, eds, 'Some Bedfordshire Wills at Lambeth and Lincoln', in *Publications of the Bedfordshire Historical Records Society* 14 (1931); R.R. Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting*, 2 vols (1889–1900); R.R. Sharpe, *Calendar of Letter Books Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall*, Books A–L (1899–1912); J.R.H. Weaver & A. Beardwood, eds, *Some Oxfordshire Wills Proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 1393–1510*, Oxford Record Society 39 (1958).

20 A corrody was a living allowance, in cash, kind, or both. In practice it usually involved a retirement plan. Some corrodial contracts guaranteed full board and lodging for the applicant, with additional benefits negotiated according to the needs of the retiree and the resources of the house. Many corrodies were supplied without charge in response to special requests, usually by the king; others attracted fees which were paid in advance to the monasteries concerned.

attitudes to the role and performance of abbess and prioress. Attitudinal shifts are also traced with respect to discernible changes in disciplinary recommendations, particularly in the area of enclosure and personal property.

A wide range of sources has been used in this study, with particular emphasis on the episcopal registers, since they contain both internal and external evidence in the form of visitation reports, letters, wills, and assorted administrative notes including lists of clerical appointments. While information supplied to the bishop or his representative by the nuns is an important key to the attitudes and performance of the abbess or prioress it must be evaluated cautiously, since interviewees appear to have been encouraged to voice complaints rather than expressions of satisfaction. External evidence is understandably more readily available than internal data; indeed, the enclosed nature of the community was meant to minimize secular contact.

It has been useful to compare the clerical view of the female superior with the perspective of her secular observers, in the light of popular literature and private documents from the period. Chapter 7 of this book acknowledges the changing social climate of the later Middle Ages and comments upon the manner in which such changes affected the shape and direction of the female superior's 'portfolio'. The differences between the views of secular and ecclesiastical observers become more acute as the drama of the Dissolution unfolds.

An assessment of the responses of female superiors to the draconian measures of Henry VIII in the late 1530s occupies the final chapter of the study. That such responses were far from universal is another indication that the idea of a 'typical' abbess or prioress is an illusion. The fear and confusion of the pre-Dissolution years tested female superiors to their limits. Some rebelled, others submitted quietly after doing what they could to secure pieces of real estate; some set up alternative religious communities either at home or overseas. Official reports, real estate transactions, wills and personal letters combine to tell a story of women under threat gathering whatever resources, spiritual and material, that were at hand.

The model of leadership evolved over time, some of its features becoming more sharply etched as the period wore on, others smoothed over. Emerging from the study are women responding with varying degrees of intelligence, nobility, piety, stubbornness and commonsense to the demands of the model on which they focused, in a period remarkable for its instability.