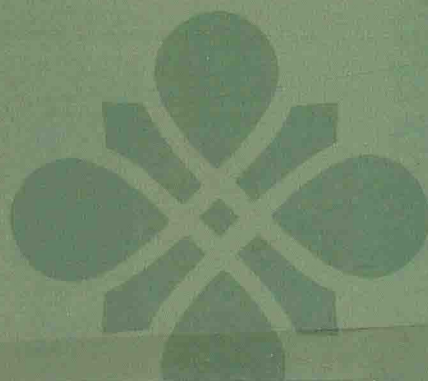




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Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents



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VERA MORTON AND
JOCELYN WOGAN-BROWNE

Guidance for Women in Twelfth-Century Convents

**Translated by †Vera Morton
with an Interpretive Essay
by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne
(Fordham University)**

D.S. BREWER

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Preface

Letters composed by women in the High Middle Ages survive relatively rarely, but many of the letters written to queens, noblewomen, abbesses and nuns are extant. This volume presents a selection from twelfth-century letters written to women in the female communities of England and Northern France. Although it is male clerics who speak in the letters, what they write is strongly conditioned by an awareness of the status and requirements of their female audiences. The most renowned letter from a churchman to an abbess included here was composed by Abelard at the request of Heloise to aid her in her work as abbess of the Paraclete. This letter's account of the role and achievements of women in Christian history is deservedly famous, though it has not been readily available in modern translation. A second letter by Abelard on the education of Heloise's nuns, also translated here, provides invaluable evidence for how women living professed Christian lives might be educated in communities.

The relationship of Abelard and Heloise, exceptional and celebrated as it is, is in this volume placed against a background of other epistolary relations in North West France and England. Selected letters from Osbert of Clare, Prior of Westminster, and Peter the Venerable of Cluny to abbesses and to young women in convents are translated here for the first time. These less well-known letters have their own considerable interest as well as providing a context for the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise.

In addition, this volume includes extracts from biographies of abbesses commissioned by their successors at the abbey of Barking. These extracts show medieval women administrators using the traditions of institutionalised female virginity and chastity in their own projects and responsibilities. The literary conventions of virginity and chastity writing could shape and express the working lives and ambitions of women as well as men in the twelfth-century church. Letters and biographical texts such as the ones translated here suggest that a richer literary and social history of medieval female communities in England and Northern France can be written than has been sometimes thought.

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I find it difficult to express the depth of my gratitude to my teacher, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne; anything of value in this book is due to her guidance and rigorous standards of scholarship; that I kept on through all difficulties is due to her kindness and encouragement.

Vera Morton

Abbreviations

ANTS	Anglo-Norman Text Society
AV	The Holy Bible: Authorised King James Version.
Bede	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum</i> (A History of the English Church and People), trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout: Brepols, 1966–).
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954–).
Cross	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i> , ed. F. L. Cross, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1997).
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna-Leipzig: Teubner, 1866–).
EETS	Early English Text Society
Farmer	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of Saints</i> , ed. David Farmer, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
FMLS	<i>Forum for Modern Language Studies</i>
Harvey	<i>The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature</i> , ed. Paul Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).
HBS	Henry Bradshaw Society
Latham	<i>Revised Mediaeval Latin Word-List</i> , ed. R. E. Latham (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1980).
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1844–).
SCH	<i>Studies in Church History</i>

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Introduction

Medieval letters on virginity and chastity

Even when addressed to a single individual, and to someone personally known to the writer, medieval literary letters were designed for copying and circulation among a wider public. Some of them are in effect treatises in epistolary form, meant not only to address particular people, but to be exemplary and useful to further audiences. The correspondence of churchmen was often copied into model collections.¹ Handbooks in the art of composition, the *ars dictandi*, taught the conventions for composing letters (the physical writing of letters was frequently done by secretaries working to dictation) and provided model examples. The twelfth century witnessed a great flowering of letters as literature and of letter collections. The correspondence of churchmen and women in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries often took the form of elaborate Latin verse love-letters in a particular development of the traditions of spiritual friendship more widely used between men in the monastic life.² While few women are known personally to have composed Latin letters after the twelfth century, current research suggests that there are more women Latin letter writers than has been thought.³ (Elite women could of course command their clerks to write letters for them, whether for business and administrative

¹ On medieval letter collections see Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, *Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental*, fasc. 17 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976) and *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. Giles Constable, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967), 2: 1–44.

² See Gerald A. Bond, *The Loving Subject: Desire, Eloquence, and Power in Romanesque France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), esp. chs. 2 and 5 and for an example from England (Muriel of Wilton), p. 141: Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), ch. 1.

³ See Alexandra Barratt, 'Small Latin? The Post-Conquest Learning of English Religious Women', in *Anglo-Latin and Its Heritage: Essays in Honour of A. G. Rigg*, ed. Siân Echard and Gernot R. Wieland (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), pp. 51–65; Laurie J. Churchill, Phyllis R. Brown and Jane E. Jeffrey, eds., *Women Writing in Latin*, 3 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2001), vol. 2.

concerns such as the management of their estates, or for more personal or literary letters).

Twelfth-century churchmen writing to women under their pastoral care or spiritual direction drew on a substantial literature of virginity and chastity from the early Christian centuries, as does Abelard in his letter to Heloise on the teaching and learning of nuns (see V below) and Peter the Venerable in his letter to his nieces (III below). The Fathers of the early Church, such as Cyprian, Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine and above all Jerome, wrote letters and rules for women living religious lives in which an ideal of virginity and chastity as a difficult and superior spiritual state is articulated. Unmarried women could be consecrated to God as virgins and women who had been married could at least be his chaste if not virgin servants. By renouncing marriage and childbirth in order to undertake a life of vowed chastity or virginity in these ways, women could become more nearly like men, more *virile* (the Latin for 'man' is *vir*). At the same time, they could lead a modest and decorous life as women, veiled and enclosed.

While a modern view of virginity and chastity might well regard them as dead and fruitless states of mind, medieval views were more positive. Incorporating and further elaborating the patristic ideals of the early Church, dedicated medieval virginity and chastity did not signal a life empty of emotional ties so much as a life where all desires and preoccupations were focussed on God, in relation to whom women were encouraged to view themselves as brides and daughters.⁴ Duty might call to service in convents, but quite as important was the engagement of emotion and desire. The idea of Christ as bridegroom is frequently offered as an ideal romance and marriage, consoling and encouraging the female reader, informing her reading and meditation with vivid spiritual relationships and providing a powerful representation of ardour and aspiration. Virginity is seen as a particularly demanding and much respected form of spiritual life, a superior version of the romance heroine's courtly existence.⁵

⁴ For important and subtle accounts of gendering in these works, see Barbara Newman, 'Flaws in the Golden Bowl', *Traditio* 45 (1989–90), 1–46, repr. in her *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Constant J. Mews, ed., *Listen, Daughter: The Speculum Virginum and the Formation of Religious Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁵ See further Kim M. Phillips, 'Virginity as the Perfect Age of Women's Life', in

Concern with the emotional state and aspirations of their audiences was not incompatible with systematic thought and analysis in virginity and chastity literature. At this period letters and texts specifically shaped for women could draw on a rich language of desire common to many genres of theological exegesis and commentary. Relations between the divine and the human were frequently expressed and understood by the tropes and figures of love discourse: twelfth-century treatments of the biblical Song of Songs for instance, built on Origen (185–c. 254) and other early commentators to present the Song allegorically as the love song of the soul, the bride of Christ, and the rewards of her love for him. The influential cycle of sermons on the Song by St Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) is one of a number of such commentaries.⁶ Emotion was not necessarily opposed to reason: human feeling and desire was, potentially, a microcosmic version of God's creativity and love. As such it could be a source of knowledge of God.⁷

Medieval ideals of virginity included much more than the notion of technical intactness, supposedly physically verifiable in women's bodies, which has often been the first meaning for 'virginity' in modern definitions.⁸ The literature of virginity and chastity also had much to say to audiences who were neither young, virgin, or unmarried. The powerful ideal of virginity was continually modified and adapted, both by churchmen and by their female audiences, so as not to exclude widows and wives. Women in these roles tended to have greater socio-economic power and were an important source of patronage for the church. They were frequently seen as honorary virgins, and encouraged to feel that their fleshly condition of chastity, necessarily humbled as it was by not being the higher-ranking state of virginity, could equal the spiritual condition of a virgin. A virgin both technically intact and consecrated to God would potentially have higher rank in heaven than a widow or wife, but might

Young Medieval Women, ed. Katherine J. Lewis, Noel James Menuge and Kim M. Phillips (Gloucester: Sutton, 1999), pp. 25–46.

⁶ E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

⁷ Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050–1200* (London: SPCK, 1972); Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, tr. Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961).

⁸ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), ch. 1.

well be open to the temptation of pride in her condition.⁹ Across the range of monastic and secular households, as well as within convents, the ideal of virginity addressed and affected the lives of women of all ages and aspirations.

In addition to positive arguments for virginity and chastity, arguments on the disadvantages of marriage are a common topic of virginity and chastity letters. The pains and dangers of childbirth are emphasised (and were indeed considerable in any case) and the wife's relationship to her husband is suggested as unworthily servile in comparison with the nun's to Christ. Thus Osbert of Clare, writing to Adelidis, abbess of Barking, sees her as a 'mother' of the convent, but a mother for whom the act of giving birth is without the 'corruption' and the dangers of childbirth in the flesh (I, pp. 22–3 below). Although virginity and chastity writings usually recommend one form of union (spiritual) over another (being wedded to an earthly man) without encouraging women to think outside the idea of marriage as such, analyses of the problems of earthly marriage in these writings can offer women a latent critique of female subordination in marriage.¹⁰

Chastity and virginity were also seen as heroic states that empowered women beyond the limits of gender. Women's capacity for suffering is the focus of many stories of saints, and though actual martyrdom might not be an option, nuns and pious laywomen were encouraged to think of asceticism and self-discipline as versions of martyrdom, less spectacular but still heroic. Nuns of the High Middle Ages were often of noble families. The idea of combating evil on her knees may have offered consolation to a young woman envious of the achievements of her knightly brothers. At all events writing on virginity offered ways of imagining the self that incorporated a range of roles. Heroic women of various kinds are offered as role models in all the texts represented here, whether their recipients are virgin brides of Christ or 'holy mothers', i.e. abbesses. The range of these figures goes well beyond the traditional virgin martyr

⁹ On virginity, chastity, and honorary virginity, see further Cindy L. Carlson and Angela J. Weisl, eds., *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999); Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture c. 1150–1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chs. 1, 4.

¹⁰ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'Saints' Lives and the Female Reader', *FMLS* 27 (1991), 314–32.

heroines of the church, though it does include them. Peter the Venerable and Osbert of Clare, for instance, encourage their nieces with examples from among the great (and semi-legendary) virgin martyrs, saints Agatha, Agnes, Cecilia (III and IV). Abelard, writing a history of women in the church for Heloise (II), includes a much wider range of women. He discusses pagan Roman forerunners such as the Vestal Virgins and the prophetess Sibyl; the women of the Gospels; and biblical figures of heroic intervention or achievement such as Judith, Esther, Deborah, and the mother of the Maccabees. Women of the early church are also present as exemplary and historically important figures, whether as early deaconesses or as the correspondents and allies of St Jerome. In Abelard's letter on education (V), such women again appear, both as useful precedents and as part of the history of women's learning. Osbert of Clare presents the biblical figure of Judith, heroic widow and decisive leader, to abbess Adelidis of Barking (I) in a very different series of examples from those offered in his letters to his nieces in the convent (IV). In Goscelin of St Bertin's portrait of abbess Elfgiva, rebuilder of the Barking Abbey shrines, the abbess is compared (much to her advantage as a Christian builder) with Semiramis and Dido, legendary foundresses and builders of Babylon and Carthage (VI).

Often the authors update their selections of traditional or historical figures by making exemplary heroines of people closer to the women for whom they are writing. Peter the Venerable makes his nieces' grandmother Raingard a figure to be lived up to (III); Osbert discusses Ethelburga, famous foundress of Adelidis' own abbey of Barking (I), a figure with whose legacy of leadership Adelidis must have been deeply familiar. In his biographies for Barking Abbey, Goscelin also portrays Ethelburga, together with many other inspirational figures from among this house's women leaders (VI). Abelard, having already drawn heavily on the figure of Jerome 'the great doctor' and his writings for women in his letter 'On educating virgins' (V), goes on to offer their own abbess as ideal example and teacher to the nuns of the Paraclete: Heloise herself is the modern day equivalent not only of the women of the early church but almost of Jerome himself. The chronological range and variety of virginity and chastity models drawn on in this small selection of texts suggests how important these ideals and the literary genres deploying them have been in women's lives and literature.

Convents and women's lives

The earlier twelfth century saw a period of intense growth in women's foundations in England and Northern France.¹¹ Convents were often both founded and patronised by the families of the leading women in them. The income from a property might be devoted, for instance, to supporting a succession of female members of a family in a nunnery over the generations. A woman undertaking vowed chastity or virginity in a religious community did not give up all human ties. Apart from the community within which she lived, her duties of prayer and intercession maintained spiritual links with her family of birth.

The reasons why women entered nunneries varied; sometimes a girl might seek refuge from a repulsive marriage: not infrequently postulants were offered to the nunnery for family convenience (the dowry for a nun could often be less than for a secular marriage). Child oblates were less frequently accepted in the twelfth century, but girls of between twelve and fifteen years were admitted; widows might choose to retire to a nunnery as might women separated or divorced from their husbands. So too, could women who actively sought and chose religious careers, such as Christina of Markyate, one of the few twelfth-century women in religion in England for whom a medieval biography is extant.¹²

Although women's religious careers and aspirations are under-represented in the extant records, there seems to have been demand from women for more places in religious houses than were available. In the late twelfth century, organised monasticism declared itself unable to cope with the numbers of women seeking places in religious houses: the major monastic orders refused to affiliate any more female houses, and the provision of resources for female religious lives became more than ever dependent on the interests of founders and foundresses from wealthy families. There were also smaller scale communities of recluses, and less expensive and more informal arrangements made by groups of (mostly) urban women for themselves, living lives of social work and religious devotion in communal houses.¹³

¹¹ On the distinctive patterns of growth in female monasticism see Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England 890–1215* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹² C. H. Talbot (ed. and trans.), *The Life of Christina of Markyate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, repr. 1987).

¹³ For the varieties of religious orders and lives in post-Conquest England see Ann

The social composition and the history of female communities in the middle ages can be seen from a range of viewpoints: a nunnery might be both a place for confining surplus women but also (and perhaps, simultaneously for some women) a place of female aspiration and opportunity. Nunneries included women of all ages, and, though usually run by women of high rank, might also include women from other classes, both among the nuns and the lay sisters who did the bulk of the physical and domestic labour within the convent.¹⁴ The life of a nunnery, strictly ordered though it was by the Benedictine Rule and its derivations and variants, was not as different from that of the larger medieval households as modern conceptions of the private family may suggest. The religious life offered the opportunity of various female careers, much as women's schools and hospitals have done in later periods.¹⁵ Goscelin's account of the building operations at Barking Abbey (see VI below) and the numerous properties from which Barking drew its revenues conform to the baronial status of abbesses in leading nunneries. Such abbesses commanded large estates and complex institutions and had to be prepared to defend their house's rights and revenues against encroachments from the crown, from other magnates, and sometimes from bishops or abbots. For such duties, women who had been married and were accustomed to managerial roles were often

K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Sharon K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Berenice M. Kerr, *Religious Life for Women c. 1100–c. 1350: Fontevraud in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). On women in French houses, see Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁴ On the socio-economic composition of nunneries, see Kathleen Cooke, 'Donors and Daughters: Shaftesbury Abbey's Benefactors, Endowments and Nuns c.1086–1130', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 12 (1989), 29–45. The classic work by Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries 1275–1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922) remains informative, though principally concerned with later medieval foundations. On meritocracy in nunneries, see Marilyn Oliva, 'Aristocracy or Meritocracy: Office-Holding Patterns in late Medieval Nunneries', in *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood, *SCH* 27 (1990), 197–208.

¹⁵ Roberta Gilchrist, *Contemplation and Action: The Other Monasticism* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1995); Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850–1920* (London: Virago, 1985).

preferred: many upper-class medieval widows entered convents, sometimes convents of their own foundation, and such women were often important patronesses or associates of female communities.¹⁶

Women's languages and learning

The range of duties, occupations and opportunities available in convent life was potentially large, especially in wealthier convents, and a nun might well have no less social work, administration, household duties than women in secular households – and rather greater opportunities for learning and for reading, the latter being an institutional part of the religious day. Nunneries were also one of the few places where women wrote, both as scribes and composers of texts. Peter the Venerable, for instance, explicitly states that he is replying to a letter from his nieces (see III below).

Like male communities, female religious houses could have both strong local and territorial affiliations through their patrons and ecclesiastical supporters and also share in the international dimensions of their orders. Abbesses dealt with Rome as well as with their local bishops and archbishops, and some nunneries, as in the case of the Fontevrault houses established by Henry II (d. 1189), were affiliated with mother houses in other countries.¹⁷ However strictly enclosed they might be, women's houses were part of the wider community of Western Christendom: Osbert of Clare's letters (see I, IV below), like those of many other churchmen, recount news from his travels, and particularly news from Rome.

Partly because of the international nature of the Roman Church as the principal institution of the Western European Latin world, there are striking similarities between northern French conventual lives and those of insular Britain. For many purposes letters about virginity and chastity from either side of the Channel can be treated as products of the same North West European culture. Not only the Latin language, but the images of piety and female chastity presented in Osbert of Clare's letters to Barking would have been recognized by the inhabitants of Peter the Venerable's Marcigny and vice versa. Barking's mid twelfth-century abbess, Adelidis, and Heloise, successful head not only of her own convent of the Paraclete

¹⁶ Thompson, *Women Religious*, ch. 9; Kerr, *Religious Life for Women* and Elkins, *Holy Women*, *passim*.

¹⁷ Kerr, *Religious Life for Women*; Elkins, *Holy Women*, 146–7.