

The Syon Abbey Society

Newsletter

*Bringing together scholars around the study of the
history and literature of the English Birgittine House*



Issue 4, Summer 2023

Editor: Brandon Alakas

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Editor's Welcome

This past year has seen many exciting developments in the field of Birgittine studies focused on the Syon community. Highlights include two panels at the 2023 International Medieval Congress at Leeds and several recent publications. Each of these highlights has shown this field to be extremely vibrant and, perhaps most important, attractive to new scholarly voices.

Notes from IMC 2023

Some of those voices were heard at the two panels on Birgittine Texts and Networks that the Syon Abbey Society co-organised with the ReVision Project at IMC 2023. Kathleen Kennedy presented research on the popularity of the Hours of the Holy Spirit at Syon. The use of this additional liturgy adds further nuance to our understanding of the devotional lives of the Birgittines, who relied primarily on the Hours of the Virgin as the sole adjunct to the Divine Office. Clark Drieham argued that the Middle English Revelation of Purgatory (1422) employs models of female intercession that draw on Birgitta's own *Revelationes*. Katherine Goodwin explored the use of Richard Whitford and William Bonde by Anne Bulkeley in MS Harley 494—a project which drew from material in her feature article for this newsletter. Yaroslav Pershyn examined potential networks responsible for transmitting Birgitta's revelations to England in the fifteenth century. Finally, I presented on the presence of John Rykes's *Image of Love* at Syon and discussed why this work—60 copies of which were removed a week after their arrival at Syon for suspicions of heresy—aligns, in fact, so well with Birgittine spirituality. A hearty thanks to all who presented and attended; the conversations were really quite enriching.

This Issue's Features

Three features in this issue of our newsletter from both established and emerging scholars further reflect the diversity of research currently being done on the Birgittines of Syon Abbey. Peter Cunich reexamines the state of Syon Abbey's finances on the eve of the Reformation. Situating rising deficits and the Birgittine's decision to sell Felsted Manor to Sir Richard Rich within the context of a significant inflationary period that endured for decades and began in the 1520s, Cunich offers a more nuanced understanding of the traditional claim of Syon being one of the wealthiest abbeys at the time of the Dissolution.

Virginia Bainbridge's contribution provides much appreciated background on Canon John Rory Fletcher (1861-1944) and insight into the genesis of *The Story of the English Bridgettines* (1933), which was originally written for friends of and pilgrims to the Birgittine community which had recently returned to England from Portugal. Katherine Goodwin explores the presence of works by Syon brothers Richard Whitford and William Bonde in a compiled prayer book of Anne Bulkeley, a wealthy widow from Hampshire whose family was well connected in Tudor court circles. Goodwin investigates Bulkeley's reworking of Birgittine texts as an expression of vernacular theology and the importance of female readers in perpetuating Birgittine spirituality after 1539.

Our recent publications column aims to capture work written on the Birgittines of Syon published in the last two years. Articles from several disciplinary approaches and the appearance of one new edition point to the many new directions scholarship about the community is taking.

Once again, the Society welcomes contributions from members in the form of news items or articles for the newsletter. Suggestions on ways to enhance the newsletter or the website are also most welcome. Please send those items to syonabbeyociety@gmail.com.

I look forward to future conversations and collaborations.

Brandon Alakas
alakas@ualberta.ca

ABOUT THE SOCIETY AND MEMBERSHIP

The Syon Abbey Society was founded by Laura Saetveit Miles, Paul J. Patterson, and Alex da Costa in 2009 to promote the study of the history and literature of Syon Abbey through online resources, sponsored conference sessions and an annual newsletter distributed online.

Membership in the Syon Abbey Society is free and simply requires submission of your email address to syonabbeyociety@gmail.com (email addresses will not be shared with any third party). Members receive approximately five to six emails a year including the Newsletter and announcements for conference sessions sponsored by the Society. This information is also available on the website www.syonabbeyociety.com.

Features

Evidence of Financial Crisis at Syon Abbey, 1515-39

PETER CUNICH
University of Sydney

We are accustomed to thinking of Syon Abbey as one of the wealthiest monasteries in late-medieval England. According to the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, the net income of Syon in 1536 was £1,731.8s.4d per annum, but the gross income was considerably higher at £1,944.11s.5d per annum, giving Syon the seventh largest net income and the tenth largest gross income among the greater monasteries in England at that time.¹ Syon Abbey exhibited many of the trappings of worldly wealth, with a large and richly-decorated church, extensive conventual buildings, and a carefully maintained demesne farm at Isleworth. The monastery was, of course, also famed for its strict observance of the Birgittine Rule of Our Saviour, divinely inspired and copied down in the fourteenth century by the order's founder, St Birgitta of Sweden. It was this adherence to the precepts of religious observance, and loyalty to Roman authority in matters of religion, that brought Syon into conflict with King Henry VIII and his principal secretary, Thomas Cromwell, in the 1530s, but this was not the only challenge facing the sisters and brothers of Syon in that tumultuous decade. Although the crisis in religion during the 1530s has been the subject of continuous debate among England's monastic historians for more than a century, the *conventus* at Syon Abbey also faced an existential crisis of at least equal magnitude in its financial situation during the final decades before its suppression in 1539.

Sixty years ago, Robert Dunning alerted us to the existence of a treasure-trove of Syon account rolls and administrative papers at the National Archives in London.² He later used these materials to illustrate in fascinating de-

tail the progress of building and repair work at Syon between 1461 and 1537.³ I began examining these account rolls nearly forty years ago, but it was not until fairly recently that I was able to focus in detail on the accounts of the various obedientiaries of the abbey, including the abbess, the treasurers, the cellaress, the chambress, and the sacristan. I was particularly interested in the annual accounts of the treasurers, the two sisters who received the bulk of the abbey's income and distributed it to the other obedientiaries. The income of the treasurers fluctuated between £1,300 and £1,500 per annum between 1508 and 1536. For the first decade and a half of the sixteenth century, they usually managed to balance income and expenditure, even accumulating a small surplus of funds over a period of several years. Beginning in 1515-16, however, expenditure began to outstrip income, forcing the abbess to redirect some of her own accumulated surplus to supplement the treasurers' income. These annual grants from the abbess ranged from £100 to as much as £400, and continued right up until the end of this series of account rolls in 1536. By 1520-21, expenditure was exceeding income by more than £400 per annum and large deficits began to be recorded, especially in the abbess's account.

We know that all monastic houses went through good years and bad years, depending on agricultural harvests and broader forces at work in the wider economy, but at Syon the 1520s witnessed the beginning of more than a decade of large deficits in both the abbess's and treasurers' accounts. By 1529, the accumulated deficit had risen to more than £2,000, a sum that was well in excess of the monastery's annual income from all sources. It is notable that in 1534-35 both the abbess's and treasurers' accounts were rebalanced and started anew, presumably following a large injection of funds from an external source that cleared the previous debt. The date of this rebalancing of the Syon books matches closely the sale of one of the monastery's principal properties in Essex, Felsted manor, to Sir Richard Rich in 1536-37.⁴ The amount paid for Felsted is not recorded, but with an annual value of £93 (around five percent of the abbey's annual income), it is likely that the purchase price was at

¹ For a table showing the twenty-eight monasteries with a gross income of more than £1,000 per annum, see David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 3, *The Tudor Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 473. Syon's entry in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* is at vol. 1, pp. 424-28.

² Robert Dunning, 'The Muniments of Syon Abbey: Their Administration and Migration in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 37 (1964), pp. 103-11.

³ Robert Dunning, 'The Building of Syon Abbey', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, vol. 25 (1981), pp. 16-26.

⁴ The transactions for the sale are summarized in *Letters and Papers*, vol. 12(i), 1330(54), p. 606; vol. 13(i), 646(42), p. 245; and vol. 15, 144(16), p. 53.

least £1,980.⁵ This amount is curiously close to the accumulated debt of £2,139 in 1529-30, although it must be assumed that by 1534-35 the debt would have been even higher after a further five years of deficits.

While the sale transaction for Felsted manor was chronologically two years later than the record showing a rebalancing of the principal Syon obedientiary accounts, we know from other sources that early sixteenth-century accounts were sometimes not presented for several years after the end of an accounting period, so this would explain an apparent delay between the rebalancing of accounts in 1534-35 and the sale of Felsted manor in 1536-37. It should also be noted that the account rolls for the years between 1530 and 1534 are inexplicably incomplete in marked contrast with previous years, making the calculation of the abbey's actual financial situation in 1534 impossible, another indication that something unusual was occurring in the finances of Syon at the time. It therefore seems likely that Sir Richard Rich was able to purchase Felsted manor from Syon Abbey because of a pressing financial need that the convent could not meet from other normal sources of income. These sources would have included entry fines for new leases (income that was not normally recorded in the annual accounts), but an examination of the Syon administrative records indicates that only four new leases were granted in the period between 1529 and 1536, although a further five leases were arranged in the final three years of the abbey's existence.⁶ It is highly unlikely, therefore, that entry fines alone could have accounted for the sudden rebalancing of the abbey's accounts for the 1534-35 financial year, and that a combination of land sales and entry fines was used to meet the unprecedented financial emergency.

What this series of monastic accounts indicates is that, although Syon is rightly considered to have been one

of the wealthiest abbeys in England on the eve of the dissolution, the condition of its finances in the 1520s and 1530s was far from satisfactory. What was the cause of this dramatic reversal in the abbey's fortunes? We know that Syon was required to pay £333 at Cardinal Wolsey's legatine visitation in 1523,⁷ and that after 1534 the abbey was subject to the new statute of First Fruits and Tenths, so there were certainly some new costs for which the abbey had to make provision in these two decades, but these impositions do not really provide us with a convincing explanation for the very sudden rise in expenditure from the mid-1510s. A more likely reason is the sudden appearance of price inflation in England during the early years of the sixteenth century.

It has been known for some time that the reign of Henry VIII marked the end of more than a century of 'surprising stability' in the cost of everyday foodstuffs and industrial goods, and the beginning of the second great period of inflation experienced by the English economy in pre-modern times.⁸ These price rises were particularly noticeable in the 1520s and 1530s, although they did not reach a peak until the 1540s when a debasement of the coinage led to rampant inflation.⁹ The decennial price indexes for the 1520s and 1530s indicate a 50% rise in the price of foodstuffs after 1515. Inflation was, then, a new economic force with which the whole of English society was coming to terms during the following two decades. While individual families who were trapped by stable wage levels perhaps dealt with the rapidly rising price of foodstuffs by tightening their belts as best they could, it was more difficult for a complex organisation such as one of the largest monastic communities in the country to respond quickly to this challenge and reduce its expenditure, especially when increases in prices were initially thought to be cyclical and therefore might be resisted to

⁵ The going rate for good agricultural land such as Felsted was twenty years' purchase, i.e. twenty times the annual value of the property. The various components of the Felsted property included in the original conveyance consisted of the entire manor with its house and the advowson of the vicarage, forty messuages in nearby villages valued at £20 per annum, 1,260 acres of land and meadow, 1,000 acres of pasture, 200 acres of wood and 40 acres of heath; see Sir Richard Rich's private Act of parliament in 1539 confirming the purchase of Felsted manor was 31 Henry VIII c.23, 'An Act Assuring Lands to Sir Richard Rich', Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/PB/1/1539/31H8n23.

⁶ These leases were for the following properties: Breade (Sussex) on 12 Dec. 1529 for 21 years; Minchinhampton (Gloucs) on 12 Aug. 1531 for 60 years; St Michael's mount (Cornwall) on 4 Feb. 1534 for 30 years; Amounderness 1 (Lancs) on 12 Feb. 1536 for 34 years; Molashe rectory (Kent) on 14 May 1537 for 30 years;

Amounderness 2 (Lancs) on 22 Aug. 1537 for 31 years; Lancaster Priory (Lancs) on 3 Feb. 1538 for 40 years; Martock (Somerset) on 1 May 1538 for 40 years; and Hinton (Cambs) on 12 Dec. 1538 for 99 years.

⁷ *Victoria History of the Counties of England*, London, vol. 1, p. 185.

⁸ N. J. Mayhew, 'Prices in England, 1170-1750', *Past and Present*, 219 (May 2013), p. 4; E. H. Phelps Brown & Sheila V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables Compared with Builders' Wage Rates', in Peter H. Ramsey (ed.), *The Price Revolution in Sixteenth-Century England* (London: Methuen, 1971) [originally published in *Economica*, vol. 23 (Nov. 1956), pp. 296-314], p. 29.

⁹ The decennial prices indexes for England from 1471 to 1550 may be consulted in Mayhew, 'Prices in England, 1170-1750', p. 5; and Phelps Brown & Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices', p. 39.

some extent by deploying accumulated reserves of cash in the short term.

We are fortunate to have access to a nearly full run of account rolls for the first forty years of the sixteenth century rendered by Syon Abbey's cellaress, the obedientiary in charge of providing food and drink for the entire monastic community and its lay *familia* that consisted of several dozen dependents. The cellaress's accounts indicate that the cost of provisioning the abbey was undoubtedly the root cause of Syon's financial difficulties. Provisioning costs rose exactly in line with price inflation in the 1520s and 1530s, peaking in 1527-29, but also reaching high levels in 1520-21, 1532-33 and 1536-37. This sustained inflation made it necessary for the treasurers to find larger amounts of money each year to cover the usual provisioning costs of the cellaress, making it virtually impossible for Syon to balance its books by simply relying on traditional income streams, even with the assistance of annual cash injections from the abbess. Financial reserves were swallowed up within three years of the first great price rise of 1519-20, and yet prices continued to rise inexorably in the years that followed. It must be remembered that it was very difficult at this time for any landholder to increase rental income because tenants were fiercely resistant to such increases. Rents therefore tended to remain stable even as prices soared. For example, the manor of Felsted was farmed to tenants for the same amount of £93 per annum from the beginning of the century until the preparation of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* in 1535.¹⁰ New leases for other Syon properties in the first thirty years of the sixteenth century appear to have been made with the same provisions for rent charges as had applied in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Thus, during a period of extreme price inflation, landed income remained stagnant. In this situation, and faced with ballooning cumulative deficits in both her own and the treasurers' accounts, it is perhaps understandable that the abbess of Syon would consider taking the extraordinary step of selling one of her prize manors to ease what was considered to be a temporary phenomenon, usually referred to in Tudor times as a 'dearth of victuals'.¹¹ Unfortunately, price inflation was not a temporary problem. By selling Felsted manor to Sir Richard Rich the abbess permanently reduced the income of the abbey from £1,945

per annum to £1,852 per annum, making it virtually impossible for Syon to weather the economic storm that was to worsen as the 1530s progressed. Even after the re-balancing of accounts in 1534-35, therefore, deficits were immediately recorded in the final two years for which accounts survive. This situation would inevitably have worsened in the 1540s, had Syon survived Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries.

We must acknowledge the stark reality, therefore, that one of the wealthiest monasteries in England was faced with ultimate bankruptcy at the time of its suppression in 1539. To address the problem of ever-spiralling increases in food costs would have required both a reduction in the traditional dietary provisions of the monastery (already regarded as one of the most strictly observant in England) together with a significant change in the abbey's estate management practices, including a large increase in agricultural rents. This would have been a very difficult task to achieve in a conservative institution such as Syon Abbey, or indeed any of the other large monasteries in the country. It may well be that Syon was particularly hard hit because of its unusually large number of religious and retainers and its close proximity to London, where food prices may have been a little higher than elsewhere in the country. If this was the case, we should also expect some of the other 'greater' abbeys such as Westminster and St Alban's to have been similarly affected by inflationary pressures. If any of these greater monastic houses had survived into the 1540s, it is likely that they too would have faced serious economic challenges from mounting price inflation.¹²

The other obvious option for a monastic community faced with such rapidly escalating food costs would have been to reduce the size of its *conventus* and *familia* in order to bring down recurrent expenditure. Such action by some orders may indeed partly account for the phenomenon of falling numbers in monastic and other ecclesiastical communities in England immediately before the dissolution. Such an option was certainly used by the fellows of Exeter College, Oxford, to alleviate the disastrous impact of inflation on that college's finances from

¹⁰ The National Archives, Kew, SC6/Hen7/146; *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, vol. 1, p. 426. In 1506-7 the manor of Felsted and Grautescourtes was being farmed by John Danyell, with rental payments due at Easter (£33) and Michaelmas (£60).

¹¹ R. B. Outhwaite, *Inflation in Tudor and Early Stuart England*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 18.

¹² A preliminary examination of the Westminster Abbey muniments for the same period indicates a similar crisis developing there, but it seems that Westminster had a greater degree of financial flexibility amongst its obedientiaries, while a reduction of its increasing costs was eventually aided by the declining size of the Westminster *conventus* in the 1530s.

the 1520s.¹³ Action of this kind was not, however, available to the Syon community. Their Rule and constitutions required a full complement of sisters and brothers to be maintained for the community to function according to the divinely inspired ordinances of the order's founder, St Birgitta. Any reduction in this number would have been difficult to justify, especially on the grounds of economy in an order which prided itself on its ascetic way of life. Syon was therefore locked into a financial situation from which there appears to have been no viable exit.

This economic dimension of the dissolution period has perhaps been hidden from view by the more obvious political and religious storms that were raging at the time. It must also be acknowledged that there are very few surviving runs of household accounts that would allow us to gain a fuller picture of the internal economies of even the largest abbeys. Syon's story may therefore be one that was mirrored in other religious communities from the 1520s, but little evidence of such a crisis has survived, even though the historiography of the Tudor period tells us that the 'lesser' monastic houses were in a parlous state at the time of their dissolution in 1536. The financial evidence from Syon indicates that even the 'greater' monasteries were perhaps reaching a daunting existential crisis when Henry VIII pre-empted their ultimate financial collapse by appropriating their endowments for his own use.

cunich@hku.hk

Canon Fletcher and the People of Syon Abbey ca. 1415-1650

VIRGINIA BAINBRIDGE
Independent Scholar

Canon Fletcher was a historian of Syon Abbey whose research deserves to be better known. Professor Anne Hutchison reminded Syon scholars of his importance in 2010.¹ John Rory Fletcher (1861-1944) became first a medical doctor, and later a Roman Catholic convert and priest. His cousin was Sr. Veronica of Syon, and Fletcher was granted the title of *Brother of the Chapter of Syon Abbey* in recognition of his services to the community. He spent

¹³ John Maddicott, *Founders and Fellowship: The Early History of Exeter College, Oxford, 1314-1592* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 191-202.

¹ Ann Hutchison, 'Syon Abbey Preserved: Some Historians of Syon', in *Syon Abbey and its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion ca. 1400-1700*, eds. Eddie A. Jones, and Alex M. Walsham (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 228-51.

the last decade and more of his life studying the history of Syon Abbey and is buried in the Abbey Cemetery at South Brent, Devon. Fletcher is best remembered for his popular book *The Story of the English Bridgettines* (1933), written for Syon's friends and pilgrims.² However, most of his research was unpublished and is contained in 35 handwritten notebooks now held in *Exeter University Library's Special Collections* as part of the Syon Abbey Collection.³ Three of Canon Fletcher's notebooks contain his *Syon Who's Who*. These he prepared in his final years in the difficult conditions of War-time London:

'When the intense air raids upon London by the Germans made the security of life & property seem very precarious, I sent Vols. i & ii of Syon's Who's Who (Vol. ii not completed) to the Lady Abbess at S. Brent for safety ... This Volume [iii] commenced on 5 August 1942 was completed on 5 March 1943. Deo Gratias! John Fletcher.'⁴

In a style which was fashionable then, he wrote out the biographies of Syon's benefactors, sisters and brothers in his best handwriting for private circulation. He began the first book with Henry Fitzhugh, the household knight to Henry IV and Henry V, who first brought the Birgittine Order to England. Fletcher was a skilled genealogist and illustrated the lives with heraldic shields and family trees. He apparently created the *Who's Who* as inspirational reading for the sisters within the monastic enclosure. Unfortunately for future scholars, he did not generally include references to his sources as they were irrelevant for his purpose.

Some aspects of pre-Reformation Syon are well-documented, but other types of record no longer survive. The National Archives in London holds many property records confiscated by Henry VIII's agents in 1539, which proved the title and value of the estates they seized. The British Library and other great storehouses of manuscripts and early printed books in Oxford and Cambridge, New York and elsewhere have accumulated Syon treasures over the centuries. Sadly, early records of convent life are lost, believed by Fletcher to have perished in the 1651 Lisbon fire which destroyed the nuns' living quarters and their papers. He therefore used the Syon Martiloge as the

² John Rory Fletcher, *The Story of the English Bridgettines* (Bristol: Burleigh Press for Syon Abbey, 1933).

³ Exeter University Library: MS 95/1-35, Canon John Rory Fletcher's MS Notebooks: <https://libguides.exeter.ac.uk/archives/syon-abbey-collection>

⁴ Exeter U.L.: MS 95/10-13, 'Syon's Who's Who', quote from introduction to vol. 13 [Vol. iii].

starting-point for researching the history of Syon Abbey.⁵ This liturgical manuscript originated with Syon's brothers and records the names of 503 people: 254 sisters, 130 brothers, and 119 benefactors. The names were read out on the anniversary of their deaths to recall their contribution to the community and to pray for their souls in the afterlife. After 1539, it was updated in Abbess Jordan's household, notably by Sr Mary Neville.⁶ The Martiloge travelled with the community on its Continental wanderings, and returned with them to England in the nineteenth century. It has since resided in the British Library as Additional Manuscript No. 22285. Dr Claes Gejrot's edition, *The Martiloge of Syon Abbey: the texts relevant to the History of the English Birgittines* (2015), includes the names and dates of death of the men and women commemorated by Syon. The Syon Martiloge is the second of three obit lists written in Syon's first two centuries. The first, of those who died 1415-51, now in Magdalene College, Cambridge, was copied into the Martiloge in the 1470s. The Martiloge commemorated those who died 1415-1647, although not all deaths were entered after 1600. A later obit list, copied from the Martiloge at Lisbon, includes additional names of those who died 1608-93, including members of the Portuguese royal family descended from John of Gaunt, grandfather of Syon Abbey's founder, Henry V.⁷

Canon Fletcher's work was built on earlier foundations. George Aungier first published the story of Syon Abbey in *The History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery* (1840).⁸ His book was aimed at an *Antiquarian* audience and included transcripts of important administrative records in public and diocesan archives. Adam Hamilton (1841-1908), a Benedictine monk of Buckfast Abbey in

Devon, became the next historian of his neighbours, the nuns of Syon Abbey. He published his research in Syon's magazine *The Poor Soul's Friend*, and a life of Syon's martyr St. Richard Reynolds entitled *The Angel of Syon*.⁹ Hamilton and Fletcher were both *Populists* writing for a general audience, prioritising what is termed *outreach* or *impact* in today's academic funding regime. Hamilton had extensive knowledge of the British Roman Catholic families which provided vocations to Syon in exile. His research notes were the basis for Fletcher's more systematic study of the people in Syon Abbey's circles. They came from the upper ranks of society and many of them, or their family members, are easily traced in major reference volumes: for example the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the *Harleian Society*, the *History of Parliament* and Beaven's *Aldermen of London*.¹⁰ Fletcher's work in identifying those of lesser rank has enabled new generations of scholars to ask more analytical questions. Notable studies of Syon's brothers have been published by Michael Tait and Peter Cunich.¹¹ Mary Erler, a scholar of English Literature, has taught historians to combine manuscript ownership and history.¹² When I embarked on my own *Syon Abbey Prosopography Project*, I was unaware of Canon Fletcher's *Who's Who*. Having reviewed the documentary sources I too concluded that the Martiloge was the obvious starting-point for a social history of Syon's first two centuries. My study now covers ca. 600 people (315 sisters, 165 brothers, ca. 120 benefactors). I owe a great debt to Canon Fletcher, who has been my companion as I retrace his steps through published sources, and search sources published since his death.¹³

⁵ Claes Gejrot, ed., *The Martiloge of Syon Abbey: the texts relevant to the History of the English Birgittines* (Stockholm: Runica et Medievalia, 2015), includes names and dates of death from both Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS F.4.23: Syon Obituary fos. 7r-12v, and London, British Library, MS Add 22285, Syon Martiloge. See also Claes Gejrot, "The Syon Martiloge", in *Syon Abbey and its Books*, 203-27. F. Proctor and E.S. Dewick, eds., *The Martiloge of Syon Abbey* (Henry Bradshaw Society 3: Salisbury, Wiltshire, 1893), prints the saints' lives from the manuscript.

⁶ Veronica O'Mara, "A Syon Scribe revealed in her Signature: Mary Nevel and her Manuscripts", in *Continuity and Change: Papers from the Birgitta Conference 2015*, eds. E. Andersson, C. Gejrot, E.A. Jones & M. Åkestam (Stockholm: KVHHA 2017), 283-308.

⁷ Lisbon, Bibliotheca Nacional, MS (A. 3-2) No. 69, Catalogus Defunctorum, tam Fratrum quam Sororum Monasterii de Sion (ca. 1693).

⁸ George Aungier, *The History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery, the Parish of Isleworth, and the Chapelry of Hounslow* (London: J.B. Nichols & Son, 1840).

⁹ Adam Hamilton, *The Angel of Syon: the Life and Martyrdom of Blessed Richard Reynolds* (London: Sands & Co., 1905).

¹⁰ Alfred B. Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London*, 2 vols. (London: Eden Fisher & Co., 1908, 1913)

¹¹ Michael B. Tait, *A Fair Place: Syon Abbey 1415-1539* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013); Peter Cunich, "The Brothers of Syon, 1420-1695", in *Syon Abbey and its books*, 39-81.

¹² Mary C. Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 2002); Erler, *Reading and writing during the dissolution: Monks, Friars, and Nuns 1530-1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 2013).

¹³ Virginia Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey and Nation Building: Patronage by Political Elites and their Regional Affinities in England and Wales ca. 1415-1558', in *Continuity and Change: Papers from the Birgitta Conference 2015*, eds. E. Andersson, C. Gejrot, E.A. Jones & M. Åkestam (Stockholm: KVHHA 2017), 128-144; Bainbridge, 'Lives of the Sisters of Syon Abbey ca. 1415-1539: Patterns of Vocation from the Syon Martiloge and Other Records', *Medieval People* 36 (for 2021, 2022), 23-66; Bainbridge,

Collectively the biographies create a rich picture of the changing lives of generations of the English Birgittines. They show that shrewd leadership enabled Syon to negotiate the complex politics of the Wars of the Roses to be a house of prayer for all three dynasties of Lancaster, York and Tudor. The strength of vocation of the sisters and brothers is reflected in the community's 600-year history.

virginia.bainbridge123@btinternet.com

Networking Prayer: Richard Whitford, William Bonde, and the Vernacular Theology of Anne Bulkeley's Prayer Book, British Library Harley MS 494¹

KATHERINE GOODWIN
Baylor University

The year is 1535. William Coverdale's English translation of the Bible is being printed in Antwerp, Thomas Cromwell and associates are taking stock of the wealth and possessions of English monasteries, and Sir Thomas More is tried and executed for refusing to acknowledge Henry VIII's supremacy over the church of England. The English Reformation has begun. As the triumph of print and the political drama of royal proportions unfolds, a woman prays: 'for all them that be not in the state of grace, as infidels, heretikes, scismatikes, and dedly synners...almighty God call them to righte feith, reformacion, & dew repentaunce...[and] send them your grace of amendement.'²

The praying woman was Anne Bulkeley, a wealthy widow from Hampshire, whose family was embedded in the political networks of the Tudor court. Her

prayers come to us today through a well-worn composite book, British Library Harley MS 494. As a collection of common liturgical prayers, selections from Continental mystical texts, and handwritten copies of contemporary *printed* English devotional works, Bulkeley's prayer book is a prime source of women's religious and manuscript culture in early sixteenth-century England. Harley MS 494 has been read as a member of the 'textual community' of Syon Abbey, as anthology of orthodox medieval piety, and is at its core a handbook of 'female Tudor piety' as defined by Alexandra Barratt.³

But could this compiled prayer book also be seen as a source of vernacular theology? As Nicholas Watson has recently stated, vernacular theology 'serves to draw together the historical study of texts in an open-ended series of pastoral, devotional, [and] contemplative...genres...and from a wide range of subject positions and institutional perspectives.'⁴ This broad and fluid genre focuses primarily on the literary function of theological language and concepts in vernacular texts. But as Ian Johnson notes, this fluidity of religious vernacular language can muddy the waters, obscuring the material processes of creation, reception, and circulation of texts like Anne Bulkeley's prayer book. To shine a light on the material and historical components of vernacular theology, he suggests that scholars attend to the *mouvance* of vernacular theology—that is, the 'condition, mode, circumstance, attribute or aspect of texts' and describes 'not just a theologically vernacular *what* but a theologically vernacular *how*.'⁵

Johnson's *mouvance* of vernacular theology allows us to consider the dynamics of textual production that ultimately resulted in Anne Bulkeley's compiled devotional text from Syon Abbey. Compilation texts like Bulkeley's are evidence of 'compilatory agency' shared between clerical scribes and their mixed audiences and as formed by

'Nuns on the Run, or the "Sturdy and Wilful Dames" of Syon Abbey and their disobedience to the Tudor State ca. 1530-1600', *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, series 3, vol. 17 (2023), 147-68; Bainbridge, "Lives of the Brothers of Syon Abbey ca. 1415-1539: Patterns of Vocation from the Syon Martiloge and Other Records", *Medieval People* 37 (forthcoming, 2023).

¹ My thanks to the generous support of the Bibliographical Society and the Society for Reformation Research for their generous support of this project.

² British Library Harley MS 494, 32v; Alexandra Barratt, *Anne Bulkeley and her Book: Fashioning Female Piety in Tudor England: a study of London, British Library, MS Harley 494* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), p. 201.

³ Barratt, *Anne Bulkeley and her Book*; C. Annette Grisé, 'The Textual Community of Syon Abbey', *Florilegium* 19 (2002): pp. 149-

162; Mary C. Erler, 'Private Reading in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth English Nunnery', in *The Culture of Medieval English Monasticism*, edited by James G. Clarke (Woodgate: Boydell & Brewer, 2007): pp. 134-147; Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, 'The *Liber Specialis Gratiae* in a Devotional Anthology: London, British Library, MS Harley 494', in *Late Medieval Devotional Compilations in England*, edited by Marleen Cré, Diana Denissen, and Denis Renevey (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020): pp. 341-360.

⁴ Nicholas Watson, *Balaam's Ass: Vernacular Theology Before the English Reformation* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), p. 124.

⁵ Ian Johnson, 'Vernacular Theology/Theological Vernacular', in *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, edited by Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), p. 76.

the pastoral program of the clergy as it was by the spiritual need of the laity.⁶ Scholars of vernacular theology like Eliana Corbari have shown how the communication circuits between lay people—specifically, lay women—and clergy brought pastoral attention to the needs of the laity. This communication of spiritual need helped clergy refine their *cura animarum* through more accessible pastoral texts that spoke directly to the devotional needs or tastes of their flock.

Reading Anne Bulkeley's compiled prayer book as a source of vernacular theology captures the *mouvance* that could have generated this manuscript prayer book. The dynamics of devotional compilation and the adaptation of original source material to the compiled text open a window onto the 'communication circuit' of the Birgittine house of Syon Abbey during the early sixteenth century, ultimately revealing how collaboration between lay women and monastic men resulted in unique books of vernacular theology. Her book includes thirty-three different prayers, meditations, and treatises with a shared theme of Eucharistic piety. Placed directly in the center of this text are manuscript copies of the 1531 print editions of Whitford's *Golden Pystle* and *Due Preparation Unto Houselyng* and Bonde's *Pilgrymage of Perfection*;⁷ collectively, these manuscript renditions of Syon Abbey publications are the longest selections included in the text.

Selections from Whitford's *Golden Pystle* reflect this sort of *mouvance* through adaptations made to the printed text to accommodate a female reader. Whitford's systematic list of prayers was first organised according to the Latin case system: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative, and ablative.⁸ However, the version in Harley MS 494 forgoes this grammatical organisation in favor of the English numerical system, 'first...second...third...' and so on. Simplifying the organisation into a vernacular list certainly streamlined Whitford's original grammar, but could it be that the scribe took into consideration the linguistic capacities of their reader?

Alexandra Barratt suggests that this removal of a Latin-based mnemonic is 'not surprising'; after all, the intended audience was a lay woman who likely did not spend her free time practicing Latin declensions.⁹ But I suggest that this mundane act of making Whitford's text more accessible to Bulkeley is an indication of the *mouvance* of vernacular theology. While there are some Latin

prayers included in the manuscript, it is unlikely that Anne knew Latin grammar well enough for Whitford's original organisation to 'translate' clearly. In this light, the scribe's numerical organisation is a further vernacularisation that eased the burden of prayer of his female reader.

Further selections from Whitford's printed corpus included in the manuscript text support this observation. Indeed, the changes made to *Due Preparation* exemplify the *mouvance* of Syon Abbey's vernacular theology in the early days of sixteenth-century reform. The first is the transformation of the neutral plural 'you' to the direct address to a female reader. Following the directions of how one ought to conduct themselves during Mass and prepare their souls to receive the Eucharist was an explanation of how a lay person—in this case, Anne—should understand the physical performance and metaphysical reality of the Eucharistic sacrifice and partake of the Body and Blood of Christ:

'Ye shall vnderstand, madam, that euery preest in sayng mass dothe represent the person of Crist & offereth that holy sacrifice and oblacion, the sacrament of the awtier, not only for hym-selff but also for all trew and feithfull Cristen peple.'

Ye shall understand, madam, is an expanded and personalised version of the more generic printed version: 'You must now remember that (as is said before) every preeste doth represent and use the person and the office of Christ.' This portion of text that interprets the personal and practical dimensions of a theological act *in the vernacular* meets the general obligations of vernacular theology. But the familiarity with the intended reader reflected in the direct address shows that this prayer was intentionally adapted for a woman whose devotional needs were known by her compilers to be better served by personal manuscript instructions than by popular, printed prayers—in short, this direct address reflects the compilatory agency shared between compilers and audience.

This example of direct address demonstrates the enmeshment of Syon Abbey with the religious experience of its lay audience, and is strengthened by the subsequent explanation of the theological principle of *in persona Christi*. During the Eucharistic ritual, the priest was both

⁶ Cr , Denissen, and Renevey, *Devotional Compilations*, p. 17.

⁷ Barratt suggests the 1531 editions as the most likely original sources.

⁸ Richard Whitford. *The Golden Pistle*. Wynkyn de Worde. London, 1531. *A Werke of Preparacion, Or of Ordinaunce Vnto Communion, Or Howselyng the Golden Pystle, an Alphabete Or a Crosrowe*

Called an .A.B.C. and the Werke for Housholders with a Dayly Exer-cyce and Experience of Dethe all Dnely Corrected and Newly Prynted [Werke of preparacion.]. London: Redman, 1531.

⁹ Barratt, p. 88.

the representation and instrument of Christ's atoning sacrifice, and the attending lay person was encouraged to mentally and emotionally identify with the priest and receive the sacrament spiritually:

‘And therfor euery devout louer of Crist in clenlyf couetyng, wysching, and desiring, with feruour of hert and mynde, to receve worthily with the preest that holy sacrament schall without doubt receve spiritually with hym the effecte therof.’

Here, Whitford communicated the complexity of medieval sacramental theology to foster orthodox conformity and to encourage his lay audience to see themselves as spiritually enmeshed with the clergy in the Eucharistic feast.

But the version of this explanation found in MS Harley 494 gives a more direct and less general explanation of the significance of this theology as part of Anne Bulkeley's devotional regime:

‘Wherfor, good madam, it schal be moch profitable and meritorious for yow in euery masse tym...so to prepare, ordre, and raise vp your mynde, your hert, yowr efforte and dessyre vn-to our lord God as though than in dede ye Schule be communed & receive with the preest the same sacrament.’¹⁰

This small adjustment of inserting a direct address has two effects. First, the contents are modified to speak directly to Anne Bulkeley rather than the original, general audience. Second, this personal address is a more explicit instruction of how to be communed alongside the priest by receiving the sacrament in spiritual effect through this prayerful practice. Taken together, these manuscript adaptations are pointed, personal, and pastoral articulations of a central theme of medieval theology and piety—the Eucharist—and suggest that the relational dynamics between lay women and clerical men fostered the *mouance* of vernacular theology.

Using these popular printed texts from Syon and other selections of Birgittine devotion, Bulkeley and her compilers' book drew together a variety of sources intended to strengthen her Catholic faith and reinforce her connections to the pious—and political—Birgittine community. Each prayer was chosen for its usefulness in fostering this religious identity that was built around the sacrament of the Eucharist and shared with the monks and nuns of the reformist Birgittine. Perhaps Anne showed

some sympathy towards the ‘Lutheran heresy’ that rejected the Catholic idea of transubstantiation and her spiritual directors at Syon thought it prudent to create a collection of the ‘greatest hits’ of Eucharistic piety for her personal use. Or, perhaps, Anne herself wanted a personalised collection of Eucharistic prayers to aid her own devotional practices even as the beloved sacrament was threatened by those Lutheran ‘heretiks, skistmatics, and dedly sinners.’

Either way, her book reveals a personal understanding, if not shared endeavour, between female reader and group of (likely male) compilers, and the spiritual need of the devout lay woman was recognised and resourced by the processes of vernacular theology at Syon Abbey. Thus, Anne Bulkeley's prayerbook provides a glimpse of the *mouance* of Syon Abbey vernacular theology in early Reformation England, and reveals not only the reception history of Syon Abbey amongst sixteenth-century readers, but the centrality of lay female readers to the continuation and adaptation of Birgittine piety during the early days of Protestant reform.

Katherine_Goodwin1@baylor.edu

News Item

St Bridget's Friends: A Reflection

After the 600-year Jubilee of Syon Abbey in 2015, many felt a need to start a group open to everyone dedicated to perpetuating the memory of the Birgittine community and to observing their prayers, which are available in the recently published *Syon Breviary*.

In 2017, with the patronage of the last abbess of Syon Abbey, Anna Maria OSsS, Sister Anne Smyth, and Adrian Wardle created St Bridget's Friends group on Facebook. This community was introduced on 4 May, St Richard Reynolds' feast day, at the Church of the Blessed Sacrament, Exeter, with two workshops focused on using the *Breviary* in local churches. The subsequent launch of the e-book by Adrian Wardle further enables those far afield to observe the Birgittine liturgy.

Joy Hanson, Co-founder of St Bridget's Friends

¹⁰ Barratt p. 214; Bulkeley ff. 55v-56r.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Alakas, Brandon. 'Delightful Fruits and Bitter Weeds: Textual Consumption and Spiritual Identity in The Orchard of Syon', *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 48.1 (2022): pp. 45-67.

Autio, Hanna; Mathias Barbagallo; Carolina Ask; Delphine Bard Hagberg; Eva Lindqvist Sandgren; Karin Strinnholm Lagergren. 'Historically Based Room Acoustic Analysis and Auralization of a Church in the 1470s', *Applied Sciences* 11.4 (2021) pp. 1-25.

Bainbridge, Virginia R. 'Lives of the Brothers of Syon Abbey ca. 1415-1539: Patterns of Vocation from the Syon Martiloge and Other Records', *Medieval People* 37 (2022), pp. 185-239.

Bainbridge, Virginia R. 'Nuns on the Run, or the 'Sturdy and Wilful Dames' of Syon Abbey and their Disobedience to the Tudor State ca. 1530-1600', *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, series 3, vol. 17 (2023), pp. 147-68.

Bainbridge, Virginia R. 'Abbess Elizabeth Gibbs, the Yorkist Regime and Syon Abbey's Devonshire patronage networks', *The Ricardian* 33 (2023), pp. 267-77.

Lagergren, Karin. 'The Birgittine Liturgical Music – Teamwork or the Product of a Single Genius Mind? A new hypothesis for an old question' in *Birgittine Circles: People and Saints in the Medieval World*, ed. Mia Åkestam, Elin Andersson & Ingela Hedström, KKHA Konfersenser no. 110 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2023), pp. 159-75.

Lagergren, Karin. 'Benedicamus Domino Tropes in the Birgittine Order: Embellishing Everyday Liturgy' in *Early Music Special Issue: Benedicamus Domino as Female Devotion*, ed. Catherine A. Bradley (Oxford University, 2023).

Miles, Laura Saetveit. 'Birgittine Borrowings in the Middle English devotional compilation *Meditationes domini nostri*' in *Birgittine Circles: People and Saints in the Medieval World*, ed. Mia Åkestam, Elin Andersson & Ingela Hedström, KKHA Konfersenser no. 110 (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2023), pp. 11-37.

Miles, Laura Saetveit. 'Syon Abbey and the Birgittines' in *Women and Medieval Literary Culture from the Early Middle Ages to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Corinne Saunders and Diane Watt (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 104-123.

NEWSLETTER SUBMISSIONS

The Syon Abbey Society Newsletter is issued annually and edited by the director of the Society. Published in PDF form, the Newsletter is distributed via email to members as well as posted on the Society's website for free download by the public. Members are encouraged to suggest relevant announcements of academic or other events, and conference calls for papers, which might be of interest to the membership for publication in the Newsletter and posting to our website. Please submit details to syonabbeyociety@gmail.com.

For the Newsletter's Features section we welcome the submission of pieces 1,000-2,000 words in length which consider some aspect of Syon Abbey or related issues and questions. Studies of manuscripts or early printed books, archival surveys, bibliographic review articles, single volume book reviews, and any other type of article that helps to promote the study of the Birgittines in England and abroad are particularly encouraged. Please submit documents in MS Word format and conforming to the Chicago Manual of Style to syonabbeyociety@gmail.com.

Updates to the Website

The Syon Abbey Society is delighted to report that our website will very soon be hosting *The Online Bibliography of St Birgitta and the Birgittine Order*, which was compiled by Ulla Sander Olsen and Stephan Borgehammar with the assistance of Jan Svensson and Joakim Philipson.

The PDF files that will be available on the Syon Abbey Society's website have been provided by Stephan Borgehammer and reformatted by Grace Nicoll.

Some History

In 2000, Stephan Borgehammar of Uppsala University received a grant from The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation to produce a Birgittine bibliography which would aid other scholarly efforts made in preparation for and in connection with the 700th anniversary of St Birgitta's birth in 2003. The grant only covered two months' work, at the end of which Borgehammar had gathered computer files with some 700 titles and fairly extensive material in the form of notes and photocopies.

In the summer of 2001 Borgehammar began collaborating with Ulla Sander Olsen, who had been collecting Birgittine bibliographical data for many years.

Finally, early in 2003 the database and the separate files edited by Borgehammar were made public. These files, previously available on the Swedish national cataloguing system LIBRIS, will again be available on the Syon Abbey Society's website by the end of 2023.