

**'I have traveled a good deal in Norfolk':
Reconsidering Women's
Literacy in Late Medieval England**

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"I have traveled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Bramins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders 'until it becomes impossible for them to resume their natural position, while from the twist of the neck nothing but liquids can pass into the stomach;' or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars, -- even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness."—
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

In memory of Valerie Lagorio

My title echoes a famous line of Thoreau's, one that points out that we can learn as much from studying the familiar as from exotica. Many of our received critical beliefs about medieval literacy in general and medieval women's literacy in particular come from analysis of very rarified texts, mostly those with literary intentions and

particularly those in Latin. The "conventional wisdom" upon which we base our assessments of literacy, rhetorical practices, and writers and their audiences in medieval England derives from analysis of these very specialized works and their putative audiences. In many ways, the practice is sound from a literary-critical point of view, but we must remember that such practices may cause us to miss some things by not looking closer to home—be it Norfolk or wherever in England—and examining domestic texts such as letters, instruction manuals, and other "homely" writings. What we find in so doing may well challenge some of our conventional assumptions and stimulate the kinds of reassessment that critical literary study should provoke.

In modern terms, to be "literate" means to be able to read or write. In the Middle Ages, though, literacy and illiteracy had a more fluid range of meanings. "Literatus" was a term reserved for those who could read and write Latin—the language of authorized textuality, of government, business, the law, and above all, the Church. It was largely, though not exclusively, the province of men. Those who were not "literatus" were known, in Middle English, as "lewed," usually translated as "illiterate." Women, largely excluded from the world of Latin textuality by religious and social custom, are generally regarded by modern scholars as "lewed," that is, unable either to read or write. On the surface, the evidence for this assessment is strong. For example, Eileen Power's 1922 study of medieval convents in England repeats accusations by episcopal examiners that nuns in many English convents were illiterate or incompetent in Latin (or later, in French, the social language of the upper classes).

Power's depiction of "the complete ignorance of Latin and general illiteracy in these houses" (250), consonant with what scholars in the 1920s believed about medieval women's lives, led to a widely-accepted picture of medieval English nuns who memorized their prayers without knowing what they were praying about—a pathetic conventional picture of women's literacy, indeed.

But literacy in the vernacular is a different subject entirely. Here, access to texts was more dependent on the need to handle written information, and both nuns and lay people were often literate in the vernacular. David Bell's 1995 study *What Nuns Read* demonstrates that medieval English nunneries owned a wide variety of texts, mostly in the vernacular, for distribution through the annual *eleccio* to their residents for private reading and reflection. The physical evidence—convent records, extant shelf marks, ownership dedications—strongly contradicts Power's picture of largely-ignorant English nuns. (In fairness to Powers, she was working with the very limited set of sources published by the early 1920s, which is a far smaller body of evidence than we have to work with today.) A sizable majority of the texts owned and read by religious women were in the vernacular, though the range of subject matter in those texts is as wide as in comparable monastic libraries. Thus, just because the bishops complained that nuns struggled to read Latin or French does not mean that they could not read the vernacular. Use of the modern term "illiterate" to describe their ability obscures this key distinction.

The case is similar for women in secular settings. Because such women had little access to formal schooling beyond 'dame schools' or sharing the tutelage of their brothers and were thus not *literati*, we tend to assume that a

great number of them were illiterate in the modern sense. Such assumptions lead us to overlook the instructions in texts like *Ancrene Wisse* warning against anchoresses setting up as teachers—for which they would have to have at least some degree of literacy. We discount the numerous paintings and manuscript illuminations that show women pursuing pious reading individually and in groups (see Bell 1988 for a convincing overview). In short, we assume that women's literacy was far less widespread and far weaker than the actual evidence suggests.

We also ignore specific statements about women and reading in domestic texts. For instance, Geoffroy de la Tour-Landry, writing a book of instructions for his daughters in 1371-72, says that reading texts is necessary to a woman's salvation:

as for redyng I saye that good and prouffitable is to al wymen/ For a woman that can rede may better knowe the perils of the sowle and her sauement / than she that can nou3t of it / for it hath be preued (capitulum lxxxix; Offord 122)

We also know that on the continent at this time, inheritance law classifies pious books as dower property because they are the "Bucher die Fraue phlege zu lese" [sic]—the books that women are accustomed to read (Groag Bell 157). If women owned these books and were expected to use their contents for the good of their immortal souls, then it stands to reason that they were expected to read the texts and to understand what they had read.

Women were also expected to respect and care for the books in their possession. The Lyminster manuscript of the Benedictine Rule for women (now Library of Congress Med. Ms. 4), copied c. 1415, probably by a female scribe named Crane, has a colophon that prescribes:

Nameliche, of these younge ladies, that thei be nought negligent for to leue here bokes to hem assigned behynde hem in the quer, neyther in cloystre, nether leye here bokes open other vnclosed, ne withoute kepinge, neither kitte out of no book leef ne quaiet.... neyther leve no book out of the place. (fol. 36r)

This colophon implies an active, if badly-behaved, group of women readers. Its subsequent call to return books in their original state, "or in better," implies a community much concerned about these valuable properties and their preservation. And the scribal errors in the text suggest that it may have been copied from a warning issued to some other group of women readers (Krochalis).

Domestic letters give us another category of evidence for the extent of women's reading. We have to use them carefully, because the major sets of surviving English letters are dominated by business and legal correspondence since they were collected as evidence in lawsuits, usually over real estate or inheritance matters. Letters written on other occasions or subjects have not been as consistently preserved. Most of the surviving letters date from the 1440s and later, when paper became readily and more economically available; vellum was expensive and tended to be scraped and re-used until it gave out. Most surviving English letters are on paper, written in remarkably small and fairly legible hands. Though the subject matter sampling is limited, based on these surviving letters we can draw some interesting inferences about women as readers and writers.

For instance, the Stonor archive preserves letters written by an Oxfordshire family connected with Thomas and later Alice Chaucer. Female correspondents like Jane

Stonor, writing in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, often include statements such as "I have read and understood your last letter" in letters sent to their husbands or letter writers. Most of the Stonor letters use time-worn compositional formulae, address the recipient as "Cousin" even when that's not the relationship, and almost always conclude with a complimentary close along the lines of "no more to you at this time, but the Holy Spirit have you in keeping"—all the signs of habitual correspondence using well-defined rhetorical formulae. Occasionally letters will have a small personal addendum before the signature—often a remark about health, or a reminder to do some shopping or return a borrowed item; the *post-scriptum* or p.s. has its antecedents in these additions. Since letters could constitute evidence of debts and expenses in a court of law, they often are filled with statements of receipts for payment or demands for bills to be settled. This is true as much of the letters from women as it is of letters from men; they are all composing according to the same conventions of polite discourse

Sometimes a passing comment provides insight into just how common it was for women to read letters. In a letter written by John Paston II to his brother John Paston III in February 1470, the older brother passes on a juicy bit of salacious gossip about the reported size of a feature of a man's anatomy in the middle of a long letter to his younger brother at home about family legal and business matters—then immediately adds a note warning not to let his mother see it:

Item, I praye yow schewe ore rede to my moodre suche thynges as ye thynke is fore here to knowe, afftre yowre dyscession, and to late hyre

understonde off the article off the treté between Syr William Yeluerton and me. (no. 248; 1: 412-15)

If his "moodre," the formidable Margaret Paston, couldn't read, there wouldn't be the need for this warning not to let her read the sexy gossip. The fact that the caveat was written—and that the men of the family are in the habit of censoring what she gets to read—suggests that she routinely read the family business correspondence (or the parts of it her menfolk thought appropriate to share with her). We know Margaret was a hands-on manager of the family estates and was deeply engaged in a wide range of the family business, political, and legal activities, as her surviving letters make clear. Those letters and the comments about her in other people's letters make it clear that she paid close attention to the written texts in her life, which would hardly have been possible were she not able to read vernacular texts.

Female correspondence, however, make us consider the other element of literacy: writing. Norman Davis, the editor of the standard edition of the Paston letters, was convinced that the Paston women were illiterate or only barely literate because they dictated most of their letters to secretaries. As I've shown elsewhere (Koster 2004), this may have been more determined by cultural practices than by inability; both male and female correspondents in England, including the Paston men, habitually had scribes write or copy their letters for them. While scribal copies make up the bulk of all medieval personal correspondence, there are a number of Paston women's letters, a few Stonor letters, and at least one letter from the small Cely collection that have at least some parts in women's autograph hands (Koster 2004).

Moreover, we have other evidence in those domestic texts previously quoted that writing was a separate and

sometimes unnecessary element of literacy. The Lyminster nuns were writers—that same colophon quoted earlier also warns the nuns that they may "neyther write thereinne neyther put out, without leve," again suggesting how active these women readers were (Krochalis).

Jane Stonor's unhappy daughter Cateryne was fostered by the Queen and wanted to come home, but circumstances apparently prevented it. In answering Cateryne's letter (that does not survive) to her mother in 1472 complaining about her situation, Jane's response shows the respect women had learned to have for written documents and the power they wielded over people's lives. The letter ignores the usual salutary rhetorical clichés that Stonor employs in most of her letters and says :

Welebylovyd doughter, I grete yow wele: and I understond ye wold have knowlech how ye shuld be demenyd. Doughter, ye wot wele ye are there as it plesyd þe quene to put yow, and what tyme þat ye cam fyrst fro myn: albeit myn husbonde and I wold have had . . . where with þe quene was right gretly displisyd with us both:....if so be þay be wery of yow, ye sshall cum to me, and ye wille your selfe: so þat my housbond or I may have writing fro þe quene with her awn hand, and ells he nor I neyther dar nor wyll take upon us to resyve yow, seyng the quenys displeysr afore.... (Letter 120: 210-211).

It is unlikely that Queen Elizabeth Woodville would have written the permission slip herself; she'd have a secretary do it and either sign or initial it. But Stonor's insistence that even her "welebylovyd doughter" can't return home without written permission shows just how important writing and the authorizations of literacy were for women.

Furthermore, Davis' contention about that the use of secretaries meant illiteracy for the women who employed them may well be contradicted in a long letter written at Christmastime 1477 by Thomas Betson, in his mid-thirties, to his kinswoman and soon-to-be mother-in-law Elizabeth Riche Stonor about his fourteen year-old fiancée Katherine:

I am wroth with Kateryne, by cause she sendith me no writtynge: I have to hir diverse tymes, and ffor lacke of answeare I wax wery: she might get a secretary, yff she wold, and yff she will nat it shall putt me to lesse labour to answeare hir letters agayne. (No. 185: 283-84)

If a fourteen year-old girl, one still living at home and without the weight of domestic responsibilities, is expected by the men in her life either to write frequent letters or to hire someone to write for her, then we have evidence that the use of a secretary doesn't necessarily mean illiteracy for women. It reflects, instead, a social practice that women of a certain status were expected to use to keep the channels of communication flowing between them and their menfolk.

The Knight of La Tour Landry, in the same passage cited earlier, echoes this presumption:

...somme folk sayen that they wold not/ that theyr wyues ne also theyr daughters wust ony thyng of clergie ne of wrytyng / therfor I say answearyng to them/ that as for wrytyng it is no force / yf a woman can nought of hit. (Capitulum lxxxix; Offord 122)

This distinction between *clergie*, studying what one reads, and *wrytyng*, the technology of recording a text for transmission, implies a subtle and sophisticated understanding of literacy in the late Middle Ages. The Knight's statement and Betson's complaints, in conjunction with the evidence of scholars like Susan Groag Bell and

David Bell, suggest that literacy for medieval women in particular meant being able to compose and deal *with* texts, if not necessarily perform the mechanical exercise of writing them down. If this is true, then many long-standing assumptions about medieval "illiteracy" that are based on a modern definition of illiteracy may need to be revised.

While there are few texts like this to show us when and how the actual technology of writing became widespread among literate women, slightly later writing guides can indicate the development of that skill. Martin Billingsley's *The Pen's Excellencie*, published in 1618 is one of the first "penmanship" treatises to discuss gender as a factor in writing instruction. In this book (the Folger Library copy of which is available online), Billingsley refers to six grades of script—Secretary, Bastard-Secretary or Text, Roman, Italian, Court, and Chancery (9r). Five of the six he describes as being appropriate for male-dominated professions, but of "Roman"—what we might call Italic or Humanist script, Billingsley remarks,

it is conceived to be the easiest hand to be written with Pen, and to be taught in the shortest time: Therefore it is usually taught to women, for as much as they (having not the patience to take any great paines, besides phantasticall and humorsome) must be taught that which they can instantly learne: otherwise they are vncertaine of their proceedings, because their mindes are (on light occasions) easily drawne from the first resolution. (fol. 10r)

Certainly this is a traditionally misogynistic viewpoint: women struggle to write because their minds are too undisciplined to focus on intellectual activity. But examination of the evidence of surviving late Middle English letters doesn't bear this out; women manage family

lawsuits, ship family goods to market, arrange marriages, even muster up posses to defend family lands in various armed conflicts (one of Margaret Paston's letters, for instance, requests both spices and extra parts for the crossbows used at home). But when we look at Billingsley's rationale for *why* women should learn to write, we see a more pragmatic argument. Women, he says,

commonly hauing not the best memories (especially concerning matters of moment) may commit many worthy and excellent things to Writing, which may occasionally minister vnto them matter of much solace.

Hereby also, the secrets that are and ought to be, betweene Man and Wife, Friend and Friend, &c. in either of their absences may bee confined to their owne priuacy, which (amongst other things) is not the meanest dignity.

Lastly, the practice of this Art is so necessary for women, and consequently so excellent, that no woman suruiuing her husband, and who hath an estate left her, ought to be without the vse therof, at least in some reasonable manner: For thereby shee comes to a certainty of her estate, with / out trusting to the reports of such as are vsually employed to looke into the same: whereas otherwise for want of it, she is subject to the manifold deceits now vsed in the world, and by that meanes plungeth her selfe into a multitude of inconueniences. (Fol. 8r / 8 v)

What is true of 1618 is equally as true of the late Middle Ages: women needed writing not only for *clergie*, the pious reflection that was assumed to be so good for their souls, but also to look out after themselves in a textual world. It's likely that some of them learned not only to read but to

write as a survival strategy against those "manifold deceits now vsed in the world."

This redefinition of literacy and acknowledgement of a broader spectrum of readers and writers can reshape our sense of medieval literature. Knowing who could read, and possibly write, a text makes our appreciation of it more complete. For some years it has been difficult to study these women's letters because of the lack of a contemporary edition. The re-release of Davis's edition through the Early English Text Society in 2005, the publication of a small selection of the Paston women's letters by Diane Watt in 2004, and the reissue of the Stonor and Cely papers in recent decades have made it possible to construct a larger picture of women's literate practices and rhetorical strategies. But the stereotypical picture of medieval women's illiteracy persists. Consider Rebecca Krug's recent book *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (2002), which devotes a long chapter to analyzing Margaret Paston's "semi-literate" status. Krug evaluates Paston's struggles to establish her own identity against her husband's and sons' textual and rhetorical dominance (as evidenced in the letters Davis prints) without discussing the possibility that Paston may have in fact been not as dependent on men's agency to express her beliefs as the Davis picture makes her appear. Mary Erler's book *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* doesn't even mention literacy as a possibility for any of the Paston women. Because Krug and Erler (and other scholars as well) rely on Davis' masterful edition and the critical judgments encoded in it, as well as the picture inherited from Power and her generation, to determine their picture of the Paston women's literacy, these fine scholars perpetuate a representation that the physical documents do not bear out.

Not every scholar can or will visit archives of medieval manuscripts to look at these letters, but that does not mean we should not be careful of accepting “conventional wisdom” without stopping to think what that wisdom is based upon.

We are even guiltier of such oversights when we work with ‘literary’ texts of the Middle Ages. How many of us, when discussing Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*, stop to think about the implications of why Damien knows he can write to May, why she reads his letter in the privy and drops it into the midden, or how she manages to write a letter in response without it being thought extraordinary that a married woman on her honeymoon was attending to her correspondence? When we teach *Troilus and Criseyde*, we rarely stop to think about Criseyde stepping into her *closet* to write a letter or the women reading romances in the garden. We teach the accomplishments of Christine de Pizan, a successful businesswoman who took control of her estate when she was widowed lest she be taken advantage of, without thinking what it meant that she has herself painted writing her books but then hires scribes and artists to make the presentation copies of her manuscripts (Dufresne). We teach Margery Kempe as if her struggle to hire just the right copyist makes her more pathetic rather than more strategic, even though she tells us that she writes letters to her son and daughter-in-law when they’re in the Low Countries (Koster Tarvers 1996). In short, we don’t tend to give the evidence of women’s literacy the critical attention it deserves—and that limits the kinds of readings we can bring to both literary and nonliterary texts. But if we revise our definition of literacy based on the evidence of what real women did, we will be able to read and teach

these texts with a fuller appreciation of their creation and consumption—a reconsideration that is long overdue.

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