

The Textual Community of Syon Abbey

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Brian Stock's definition of textual community describes the process by which—in the face of growing levels of literacy and the rise of heretical movements in eleventh- and twelfth-century France—religious communities (from heretical sects to orthodox monastic communities) came to understand their identities through the mediation of written texts, which often were interpreted for them by key individuals.¹ The text, the written word, became central to communal identity, affecting even the non-literate through its dissemination and acceptance by the members of the community. The relationship between the oral and the written, and the relationship developed between text and life, word and deed, in the interpretive models that developed out of texts and came to be applied to the lives of the readers or auditors, are two areas which are not the exclusive preserve of eleventh- and twelfth-century France, but are continuing concerns throughout the Middle Ages. Furthermore, the tendency to develop textual communities can also be found in the later medieval period, but with a different perspective on the question of literacy. For women religious in late-medieval England, for example, literacy usually did not denote Latinity but rather vernacularity; as a result, vernacular texts comprised the means by which these female religious came to understand their communal identity. While Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs addressed his male monastic community in Latin, women's religious rules formed a different kind of textual community that relied not on Latin exposition of mystical experience but on vernacular instruction concerning certain daily activities and proper conduct. The parallels between Stock's examples and the situation of medieval English female religious are still useful, because both highlight literacy, textuality, ritual, and activity as central to how communities define themselves.

In the last decade, much has been written concerning the medieval community as religious, familial, or political;² as defined in opposition to or within other

communities or the larger society; as a physical or spatial entity;³ as involving itself with literary production and reception—as textual communities,⁴ reading communities and communities of book owners,⁵ and communities of writers, scribes, and illuminators.⁶ The well-documented foundation of Syon Abbey, a fifteenth-century Bridgettine monastery, provides an excellent case study for the examination of late-medieval notions of female religious community. I argue here that Syon's female community developed its identity out of the rituals and everyday practices⁷ outlined in its religious rules.

The Bridgettine order, established by Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373, canonised 1391),⁸ gained a small but strong foothold in England: Syon Abbey was the only house of the Order of the Most Blessed Saviour (as it was officially known) to be founded in England. Yet this monastery, and the Bridgettine influence in England, was by no means inconsequential throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.⁹ Established (along with the neighbouring Carthusian monastery Sheen, located across the Thames from Syon in Middlesex) by Henry V, the royal foundation enjoyed almost immediate popularity and respectability in English society, attracting women from prominent English families for its female community as well as university scholars for its male house.¹⁰ Although the use of double monasteries was unusual for the time,¹¹ Bridget of Sweden saw it as crucial to ensuring the self-sufficiency of the monasteries: female religious relied upon their brothers (rather than male religious outside of the house) for administering the sacrament and hearing confession, for example. While Syon had a strong sense of itself both as a double house and as a female community, the latter being especially prominent in the production of Syon as a reading community, this paper will consider only the female community.

Syon Abbey was a community closely tied to the text and the written word, for the inhabitants would read, hear, and perform texts for their office, in their devotions, and in the refectory.¹² The bookish nature of the foundation also demonstrates itself in the reputation of the Syon monks as scholars, writers, and scribes, and by the survival of the catalogue of the men's library, a testament to the importance placed upon books at the house.¹³ The use of religious rules that prescribed and governed the conduct of the members of the order is another means by which the written word is central to the identity of religious houses. The most significant of the texts for the Syon sisters was the *Rewyll of Seynt Saueoure*,¹⁴ given to Bridget of Sweden by divine revelation, which sets out the conduct appropriate to the Bridgettine nun. As that which the entire community read and followed, these kinds of texts outlined a comprehensive picture of the conduct and governance of the community. Brian Stock explains:

Sets of rules, that is, codes generated from written discourse, were employed not only to produce new behavioural patterns but to restructure existing ones. Literacy thereby intersected the progress of reform. At an individual level, a change was brought about in the means by which one established personal identity, both with respect to the inner self and to external forces. And the writing down of events, the editing so to speak of experience, gave rise to unprecedented parallels between literature and life: for, as texts informed experience, so men and women began to live texts (Stock 4).

Following the prescriptions set out in religious rules reinforced the sense of communal identity through collective behaviour and habits. A nun at Syon Abbey was one of many involved in a communal enterprise, her own faith supported by a shared existence.

The *Syon Additions for the Sisters*,¹⁵ produced shortly after the foundation of Syon to supplement the rule (and after a series of rulings which constrained the nuns' behaviour), establishes the relationship between the monastic community and its regulatory texts. Novices heard the rule and the statutes that would govern them at Syon when they entered the convent (Hogg 4:82), and every week the entire community heard the rule (Hogg 4:161). Furthermore, when the novice entered the monastery, she did so by promising to live according to the written texts that formed the basis of the order and the house. On the day of her profession, she stated:

Therfor I holdynge me fullich contente of al the premysses, promytte to the abbes of thys monastery, and to thy successours, me to kepe obedience after the rewle of saynt augustyn and constitucions of saynte birgitte. Acceptyng, allowyng, and also admyttyng, the popes letters or bulles, and namely that bulle, whiche amonge vs is kleped Bulla reformatoria with other autentyk wrytynges not discrepante or discordynge to the seyde bulle. Acceptynge also, allowyng and admyttyng, the addicions addyd to the seyde rewle, priuyleges, ordynary iniuncions, local statutes, laudable customes, decrees, and al other ordinaunces after the forme expressyd in the fourtenth lefe of thys register, wylfully admytted, and resonably approued, by the comen consent of sustres and brethren professed tofore me (Hogg 4:97-8).¹⁶

The formal submission to practically every legal and regulatory document that the Abbey possessed marked the importance accorded to textual expressions of the house's

governance and rule. The nun's public and oral declaration of her acceptance of this practice seals her obedience to the written word; she further promises to uphold the written word in her behaviour. These fundamental texts—the Augustinian rule, Bridget's supplementary rule and the additions, and the papal bull—defined the identity of the individual and the community constructed here.

Similarly, the symbolic power of the text was central to the ceremony in which the bishop confirmed and the sisters welcomed a newly-elected abbess:

Ande the abbes hauynge the boke of the rewles and constitucions in her lappe, al the sustres schal make ther obedience to her, yf they haue not do it before, leyng ther ryghte handes vpon the seyde boke, the priores begynnyng yf ther be any, sayng thus eche after other.

The wordes of obedience makynge.

In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen.

I suster, expressyng her own name and syr name, byhote to the abbes of thys monastery, me for to kepe obedience, after the rewle of saynte austyn, and constitucions of saynte birgitte (Hogg 4:52).

The nuns confirm both the authority of the text and the construction of their community by texts: the individual abbess is important, but the institutional identity of the community resides in the public role of the abbess and in the texts that define Bridgettine communal living. The copy of the rule held by the abbess in her lap marks this fundamental linkage. The conduct, governance, life, and identity of the nuns inhere in the book held by the Abbess: the rule for their order. The *Remyll* and the other regulatory texts and documents would govern all conduct, thoughts and actions at Syon. Furthermore, the emphasis on the institutional identity suggests that individual nuns and abbesses could come and go, but Syon—its community, identity, and texts—would continue.

Two unique Bridgettine rituals emphasise the relationship between the institutional identity—meant to be static, stable, eternal—and the lived life of the community and its members—more often fluid, open, and bound by the restraints of time and mortality.¹⁷ The first is the recitation of the *Aue Maria* and the *Indulgete nobis* preceding Evensong, which marked the importance of asking for and granting forgiveness at the end of each day.¹⁸ The second is the singing of the psalm *De profundis* after Tierce, at the site of an open grave into which the Abbess would throw some loose dirt. This ceremony allowed the nuns to contemplate each and every day their mortality and their

impending judgment by God. These rituals were important for their symbolic value, for they provided an outward manifestation of the ideals of claustration, chastity, and selflessness for female religious. Also, while the ceremonies aimed at turning the nuns inward to contemplate monastic ideals, they also served to promote the idea of working together for common goals and forming a sense of communal identity.

The *De profundis* ceremony, though quite simple, is worth further consideration. After Tierce, the nuns proceed out of the choir to the site of an open grave, into which the Abbess throws some earth, while the community sings *De profundis* (Psalm 130). After the psalm occurs the reading of obits, which causes further reflection on death and mortality. Although the nuns could read about this ceremony in several texts, the primary description was in *The Remyll of our Saueoure*, where it receives full treatment as a ritual instituted by Bridget specifically for her order.¹⁹ The grave, then, is a remembrance of death:

Svche a pytte at lykenesse of a grave must be hadde in the monastery in dewe place iche day opyn, to which aftir tyerys euery day, festful and ferial, þe susteryn must go oute. And þe abbes castyng oute a litel erth of the pytte with two fyngeris, they must sey this psalme De profundis with a colete vndir this forme (Hogg 2:57).

The ensuing collect or “orysoun” explains both the spiritual goal of the nuns and the ways in which the *De profundis* can help them achieve it, particularly through emulation of the Virgin Mary, whose Assumption into heaven is the ideal for which to strive:

Lorde, holy fadir, þat keptist the body which þoue toke to thi sonne of the virgyn marie vnhurt in þe grave and reysidyst it vncorrupt, we beseche þe: kepe oure bodies clene and vndefoyled in thyn holy seruice, and dresse so oure weyes in this tyme, þat whan þe grete deedful day of dome comyth, oure bodies mowe be reysid vp among thy seyntyts. And oure soules ioye with the euerelastyngly and deserue to be felaschippid with thy chosyn. In the name of the fadir and of þe sonne and of the holi gost. Amen (Hogg 2:57-8).

The description of the ceremony concludes with the placing of the bier so that the nuns can continually contemplate its meaning:

The bere vpon which a litel erthe is putt must be sette tofore the entre of þe chirch contynuelly, wher it may alwey be seen of hem þat entre, þat they

seeng it haue it in mynde remembraunce of deth and thynkyng in her her-
tys, that they are erthe and in to erthe they shall turne (Hogg 2:58).

Throughout this passage the remembrance of death, the open grave, complements the notion that this cloistered community has already achieved “death to the world” and given up all earthly concerns and ties. This death to the world produces a liminal state for the Syon nuns, who inhabit an earthly Syon which attempts to approach the heavenly one.

The *De profundis* ceremony symbolises this liminal state with the nuns’ chaste state, enacting it on the bodies of these female religious so that their symbolic purity continually juxtaposes against the open grave. In the collect, the nuns ask that their bodies be kept “clene and vndefoyled in thyn holy seruice,” yet Bridget’s order did not solely include virgins. Bridget herself had been a wife and mother before she became a visionary, and she did not exclude other women who had been wives and mothers from joining her order.²⁰ The focus on cleanness and lack of defilement perhaps emphasised chastity instead of virginity, while the qualifying phrase “in thyn holy seruice” draws attention to their present state rather than what they might have been in the past. The importance of chastity, purity, and integrity here suggests that the nuns indeed aspire to model themselves on the Virgin Mary and achieve assumption into heaven.²¹ The focus on Mary also highlights the complicated physical states of women. Virgin and also mother, Mary illustrates the variety of women’s roles while at the same time drawing attention to the difficulties the body and sin (original and otherwise) can cause for those who devote themselves to the religious life. While the grave connotes bodily corruption and death, the Syon nuns follow Mary’s example and aspire to spiritual perfection, physical purity, and life after death. Its placement in the *Remyll* underscores the importance of this message, for the discussion of the *De profundis* ceremony comprises the final section of the text. The *Remyll* concludes abruptly, after remarking that this ceremony should call to mind one’s death, with “Here endith the rewelle of seynt savioure.” The contemplation of death and judgment seems an appropriately sober point to conclude this rule for the Syon nun.

The fixation on chastity unsexes the gendered female body, and, combined with the rule’s focus on death and corruption, requires that the participants reject the body and all it represents. Julia Kristeva argues that the abject, that which is objectified and ejected from the bounds of culture, comprises the feminine and maternal.²² Although the *De profundis* ceremony objectifies the bodies of the participants and attempts to make them abject—the source of corruption and decay—nevertheless these bodies

would be transformed (through their chastity and their participation in the ritual) into that which would house their souls as they enter heaven after judgment. Their bodies are the symbols of both corruption and purity, sin and salvation, and in all cases serve to distinguish them from those outside the community. This ceremony encapsulates the relationship between the Syon nun and her body—it is that which is to be simultaneously rejected and celebrated by the nun, her community, and her society. As a participant in the *De profundis* ceremony, the Syon nun could not turn away from her gendered bodily presence; the ghost of this presence would remain after death in her return to the body when she would assume her place with Mary and the virgins. The exhortations to reject the gendered body, then, paradoxically inscribe a feminised sense of corporeality onto those who performed this ceremony. The ambivalent attitudes toward the female body exhibited in the devotional practices and texts for the Syon nuns demonstrate the difficulties late-medieval culture grappled with when distinguishing women religious from women outside the monastery. Elizabeth Grosz argues that “inscribing” the body with a culture’s ideas of gender and sexuality, for instance, can occur not only through the violent and punitive measures proposed by Foucault, but also

by *less openly aggressive* but by no less coercive means, through cultural and personal values, norms and commitments. The latter involve a psychic inscription of the body through its adornment, its rituals of exercise and diet, all more or less “voluntary” inscriptions by lifestyle, habits, and behaviours. Makeup, stilettos, bras, hairstyles, clothing, underclothing, mark women’s bodies in ways other than the ways in which hairdos, professional training, personal grooming, body-building etc. mark men’s. There is nothing natural or a priori about these modes of corporeal inscriptions: through them, bodies are marked so as to make them amenable to the prevailing exigencies of power. They make the body into a particular *kind* of body—pagan, primitive, medieval, capitalist, Italian, American, Australian. What is sometimes loosely called “body-language” is a not inappropriate description of the ways in which culturally specific grids of power, regulation and force condition and provide techniques for the formation of particular bodies.²³

The “more or less voluntary inscriptions” outlined by Grosz parallel the descriptions formulated in the *Remyll* and *Additions*, which serve to produce the particularities (habit, Office) that mark their readers as late-medieval English well-to-do nuns at the Bridgettine Abbey of Syon on the Thames outside London.²⁴ If, as Grosz suggests,

bodily terms define gender and sexuality, then the Syon nuns both embodied and negated these categories by taking religious vows.

Rather than Bernard of Clairvaux (whom Stock describes as the mediator of the textual community at his monastery), the Syon community has the image of the Abbess holding the rule in her lap while the community makes obeisance to her and the text: she represents and mediates the written text which elucidates the appropriate behaviour of the community. Making obeisance to the Abbess and the rule reflects the obedience the community is to show to authority—both ecclesiastical and textual. The text in this textual community therefore represents control and authority. Mediation and interpretation impose themselves from above, first by Bridget of Sweden, who receives her mission from God; second by the original compilers of these materials; and third by the translators who interpret the texts as they translate them into Middle English for the female religious readers at Syon. Nevertheless, the formation of communal identity at Syon did not create a monolithic entity; rather, the texts (foundation charters, papal bulls, the *Rewyll* and *Additions*) provide a prescriptive ideal and demonstrate the way a monastic house could form its identity and cohesion through its regulatory texts. This does not mean that all members thoughtlessly obeyed all precepts and had no self-consciousness about the prescriptions placed upon them. These texts maintain a persuasive, hortatory stance toward the reader, who is encouraged to think of the texts as portraying an ideal of what the monastic community could be. Scholars today inevitably must privilege the written word and text since these are the materials we have available. Nonetheless, it is clear from the inclusion of these texts in their institutional ceremonies that the power of the written word was significant at Syon, and that texts and words helped to form the perception of the community. Indeed, some of the texts written for Syon were printed and thereby made available to a larger audience. Texts such as *Myroure of Oure Ladye* and the *Orcherd of Syon* exploited the feminine associations with vernacularity,²⁵ and relied upon the typical gendered model of medieval textual production in which male religious were writers (the Syon and Sheen monks) and female religious were readers (the Syon nuns).²⁶ This model promoted Syon's female community as a group of readers, while the male writers of these texts became individualised as authors, sometimes anonymously, as in the *Myroure of Oure Ladye* and the *Orcherd of Syon*, and sometimes with a clear sense of developing a writerly persona, as in Richard Whytford's works.²⁷ These female readers find themselves represented in the texts written for them, while the same representations are marketed to a larger audience which also partakes, in a way, in the Syon community.

The Syon community began with one set of institutional documents, some in Latin, some in the vernacular, but achieved its fullest expression in the vernacular rules and additions written for the community. The nuns were responsible for reading (along with their other devotional materials) the Augustinian rule, Bridget's own rule, and the additions to the rule drafted in England after legal objections were raised about certain statutes of the Bridgettine rule. It may be that this plethora of rules—the writing and rewriting of the texts of the English Bridgettines—resulted from the attempts to address several of the tensions inherent in monasticism (especially in fifteenth-century English monasticism, with the pressures for reform building from all sides). Rituals and ceremonies allow the community to mediate these texts by performing the ideals of community in their daily practices. Acting out community, femininity, and piety, the Syon nuns both reinforce these ideals, negotiate them, and enact their tensions. The example of Syon suggests that community building is not a simple matter, but was an integral part of the identity of a religious house: texts and institutional documents were key in defining the identity of the community, for texts and interpretations solidify the ideals and practices that represent this community to itself and to others.

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Notes

1 *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).

2 See Diane Watt, ed. *Medieval Women in their Communities* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1997); Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993); Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996); David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985); and Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1995).

3 See Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London: Routledge, 1994).

4 A fuller analysis of the community of Syon Abbey is C. Annette Grisé, *Syon Abbey in Late-Medieval England: Gender and Reading, Bodies and Communities, Piety*

and *Politics* (Ph.D. Univ. of Western Ontario, 1998). I wish to thank the readers of the dissertation and of an earlier version of this paper for their valuable comments and insights.

5 A.I. Doyle's research has been instrumental in the analysis of late-medieval female readers and book owners in England. See his *A Survey on the Origins and Circulation of Theological Writings in Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries* (Ph.D. Cambridge University, 1954); "Books Connected with the Vere Family and Barking Abbey," *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society* 25 (1958): 222-43; and "Publication by Members of the Religious Orders," in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375-1475*, eds Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), pp. 109-24; "Book Production by the Monastic Orders in England (c1375-1530)," in *Medieval Book Production: Assessing the Evidence*, ed. L.L. Brownrigg (Los Altos Hills: Anderson-Lovelace, 1990), pp. 1-19. See also Carol M. Meale, ed. *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) and Anne M. Dutton, *Women's Use of Religious Literature in England, 1350-1500* (Ph.D. University of York, 1995).

6 See Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1997).

7 For a very useful theoretical approach, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1984).

8 For Bridget's revelations see: C.-G. Undhagen, ed., *Sancta Birgitta Revelaciones Book I*, SFSS Ser. 2, Lat. Skrift., VII:1 (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1977); B. Bergh, ed., *Sancta Birgitta Revelaciones Book V*, vol. 5 (1971); Bergh, ed., *Book VII*, vol. 7 (1967). The complete Latin text of the revelations is also available in a fifteenth-century edition: *Revelationes Sanctae Birgittae* (Lübeck: Ghotan, 1492). For the Middle English see William Patterson Cumming, ed. *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*, EETS o.s. 178 (London: Oxford UP, 1929), and Roger Ellis, ed. *The Liber Celestis of St. Bridget of Sweden* EETS o.s. 291 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

9 Any study of Syon Abbey begins with Roger Ellis, *Viderunt eam Filie Syon: The Spirituality of the English House of a Medieval Contemplative Order from its Beginnings to the Present Day*, Analecta Cartusiana 68 pt. 2 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1984) and "Further Thoughts on the Spirituality of Syon Abbey," *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England*, ed. R. Boenig and W. Pollard (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), pp. 220-43. See also George James Aungier, *The History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery* (London: J.B. Nichols, 1840); J.R. Fletcher, *The Story*

of the English Bridgettines of Syon Abbey (Syon: Brent, 1933); and M.B. Tait, *The Brigittine Monastery of Syon (Middlesex) with special reference to its monastic usages* (D.Phil. Oxford University, 1975). For discussions of Syon's influence in England, see F.R. Johnston, "The English Cult of St. Bridget of Sweden," *Analecta Bollandiana* 103 (1985): 75-93; Roger Ellis, "Flores ad Fabricandam...Coronam": An Investigation into the Uses of the Revelations of St Bridget of Sweden in Fifteenth-Century England," *Medium Ævum* 51 (1982): 163-86; and Neil Beckett, "St. Bridget, Henry V and Syon Abbey," in *Studies in St. Birgitta and the Brigittine Order*, ed. James Hogg, *Analecta Cartusiana* 35:19 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1993), 2:129-50.

10 See Vincent Gillespie, "Dial M for Mystic: Mystical Texts in the Library of Syon Abbey and the Spirituality of the Syon Brethren," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, Exeter Symposium VI*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), pp. 241-68 for a recent treatment of the Syon brothers.

11 The Gilbertines, native to England, also incorporated male and female religious into their monasteries: see, for instance, B. Golding, *The Gilbertines* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).

12 For a discussion of the technical aspects of Syon's textuality, see Mary Carpenter Erler, "Syon Abbey's Care for Books: Its Sacristan's Account Rolls 1506/7-1535/6," *Scriptorium* 39 (1985): 293-307.

13 See Vincent Gillespie, ed., *Syon Abbey*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues, vol. 9, with *The Libraries of the Carthusians*, ed. A.I. Doyle (London: British Library in association with the British Academy, 2001).

14 James Hogg, ed. *The Reryll of Seynt Sauioure*, 4 vols, Salzburger Studien zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik 6 (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1980). As a result of the Church's ban on new orders, Bridget followed ecclesiastic regulations by establishing her order under the Augustinian rule, with a supplemental rule, the heart of Bridgettine observance, developed by Bridget and set down by her spiritual advisor, Peter Olafson. The Syon Additions to the rule, discussed below, provided local regulations for the house. See also Roger Ellis, "The Visionary and the Canon Lawyers: Papal and Other Revisions to the Rule of St Bridget of Sweden," in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), 71-90.

15 I use here the title employed by James Hogg, who states in his introduction that the British Library staff entitled MS Arundel 146 *The Orders and Constitutions of*

the Nuns at Syon (Hogg 4:v). Previous scholarly editions of the text call it the *Additions to the Rule* (Aungier, 249-404) and *Syon Additions to the Rule of St Saviour* (Veronica R. Hughes, *Syon Additions to the Rule of St Saviour* M.A. University of Liverpool, 1952). The Additions supplemented the Bridgettine rule by providing local regulations for the house. All references to the *Additions* come from Hogg's facsimile edition.

16 Another version of this scene is found in Hogg 4:87-8.

17 For another perspective on ritual and symbol, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1992).

18 John Henry Blunt, ed. *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, EETS e.s. 19 (1873; Millwood: Kraus, 1981), p. 151.

19 *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* and the *Additions* both contain a discussion of the *De profundis* ceremony as well: Blunt 142-6 and Hogg 2:114-15.

20 Bridget recounts a vision in which Christ explains that wives and widows can be equal to maidens: "wheþir scho schall be wyfe or maiden still, sho pleses me yf hir will and desire be to me. It is bettir þat þe body be wythoute and þe saule wythin þan þe body be closede and þe saule wauerynge abowte" (Ellis, *Liber Celestis*, 4:72, p. 316). Compare to Margery Kempe's worries about her lack of virginity, which prompted Christ to explain to her that "I lofe wyfes also, and specyal þo wyfys which woldyn levyn chast, 3yf þei mygtyn haue her wyl, & don her besynes to plesyn me as þow dost, for, þow þe state of maydenhode be mor parfyte & mor holy þan þe state of wedehode, & þe state of wedehode mor parfyte þan þe state of wedlake, 3et dowtyr I lofe þe as wel as any maydyn in þe world. Þer may no man let me to lofe whom I wele & as mech as I wyl, for lofe, dowtyr, qwenchith al synne" (Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS o.s. 212 (1940; New York: Kraus, 1961), p. 49).

21 Mary's role as God's handmaiden also points to the importance accorded to obedience in this passage and in religious rules generally. Bridget is told that a monk's "abyt suld be obediens and keypyng of hys profession. For ryght as þe body is cled wythoute, so suld þe saule be cled wythin wyth gude vertuse" (Ellis, 4:121, p. 354). Similarly, *The Orchard of Syon*, the Middle English translation of Catherine of Siena's revelations, which was produced for the Syon nuns, devotes its final section (part 7) to the virtue of obedience: Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey, eds *The Orchard of Syon* EETS o.s. 258 (London: Oxford UP, 1966).

22 Julia Kristeva's work on abjection can be found in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) and she has examined the subject of motherhood and the feminine in much of her work, notably "Motherhood According to Bellini" in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980), pp. 237-70, and "Stabat Mater" in *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), pp. 234-63.

23 Elizabeth Grosz, "Inscriptions and Body Maps: Representations and the Corporeal," in *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, eds Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 238-9.

24 Their grey habit was unusual, for the wimple included a white linen crown that connected with crossing white bands over the top of the wimple, in the form of a cross. To honour the popular late-medieval devotion of the five wounds of Christ, five small pieces of red cloth were stitched where the white bands joined. In addition, the nuns wore lambskin mantles and furry boots in the winter, a requirement that came out of Bridget's northern European roots.

25 See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), and more recently the analysis of the relationship between gender and vernacularity in Rita Copeland "Why Women Can't Read: Medieval Hermeneutics, Statutory Law, and the Lollard Heresy," in *Representing Women: Law, Literature, and Feminism*, eds Susan Sage Heinzelman and Zipporah Batshaw Wiseman (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), pp. 253-86.

26 It is not always the case that religious women were only consumers of devotional literature, although they are very often depicted in this way. Hamburger's work on nuns who produced manuscripts and illuminations and Driver's argument about the participation of the Syon nuns in the use of Bridgettine woodcuts in early printed texts suggest that women were involved in literary production and reception in other ways besides as readers and owners of texts: Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*; Martha W. Driver, "Nuns as Patrons, Artists, Readers: Bridgettine Woodcuts in Printed Books Produced for the English Market," in *Art into Life: Collected Papers from the Kresge Art Museum Medieval Symposia*, eds Carol Garrett Fisher and Kathleen Scott (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1995), pp. 237-67.

27 Curiously, it seems to be later Syon writers who include their authorial identity, while earlier Syon writers prefer to remain anonymous. See, for example, Richard Whytford's works, including *The Pype or Tonne of the Lyfe of Perfection* and *A Werke for Housholders: A Dayly Exercyse and Experyence of Dethe* in James Hogg, ed. *Richard*

Whytford's The Pype or Tonne of the Lyfe of Perfection, 5 vols, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 89 (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1979); and *The Imitation of Christ* in Edward J. Klein, ed. *The Imitation of Christ: From the First Edition of an English Translation Made c1530* (New York: Harper, 1941).