

## Matronage or patronage?

### The case of Osbern Bokenham's women patrons

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In his innovative all-female legendary, the fifteenth-century Augustinian friar Osbern Bokenham names no fewer than six women friends from the local East Anglian gentry and nobility.<sup>1</sup> Two are explicitly said each to have commissioned one of the thirteen lives narrated in the legendary, and it is fair to assume that the others either commissioned lives of their patron saints or were rewarded with them in return for donations of land or money to Clare Priory, the well-connected establishment where Bokenham spent most of his life.<sup>2</sup>

The recovery of knowledge about women's role as producers and consumers of culture—that is, as readers, writers, illuminators, patrons, buyers or sellers of literature, and art—is one of the important accomplishments of recent feminist scholarship concerning the Middle Ages. Yet, while establishing a greater role for women than hitherto imagined, this work does not necessarily prove a larger social influence or power that might prompt the neologism “matronage.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the evidence may bear witness to patronage, to the disempowerment of women in the larger public sphere. This, I suggest, is the paradoxical evidence of Bokenham's women patrons.

Men friends and patrons are, of course, not absent from Bokenham's text. Two husbands are named in partnership with their wives: John with Katherine Denston (2092-8), and John with Isabel Hunt (4974-81). As well, a good deal of space in the Prologue (175-240) focuses on a close friend, the poet's “sone and fadyr” Thomas Burgh (203), who requested the translation of Margaret's life and to whom the work

is dedicated.<sup>4</sup> However, the poet's six women friends are a prominent feature; they will be presented here in order of ascending social rank: wealthy gentry, wealthy gentry married to nobility, and finally nobility of royal blood. The class-inflected rhetoric of his references suggests that social degree matters to Bokenham; the two noblewomen, for instance, receive by far the most lines and the most elaborate treatment—including the dramatic scene or *enargeia*, placed at the poem's centre, and portraying the commissioning of a legend.

One of these women we know nothing about. This is Isabel Hunt, mentioned along with her husband, John Hunt, in a stanza at the end of the life of Dorothy (4976-78); they are said to have requested the translation. Of this couple I can find no trace. For the others, though, enough information survives that the figures come alive, in dimensions both familial and political, with their loyalties and tragedies, their romances and ambitions, and their rivalries.

The prologue to St Agatha's life concludes with a special prayer on behalf of Agatha Flegge (8339-52), though she is not described as having commissioned the poem. The prologue and legend are in rhymed couplets, and the prayer is a straightforward statement about confession and salvation. Agatha was married to John Flegge, knight, administrator, and business associate of some of Bokenham's other patrons.<sup>5</sup> In 1440, Richard duke of York appointed Flegge keeper of his great park in Essex, and in 1443 keeper of the warren. Richard was lord of the honour of Clare (among many other holdings) and thus landlord of Clare Priory, where Osbern Bokenham lived. Flegge also served under Richard as captain in northern France throughout the 1440's while Richard was commander of England's forces in the final days of the Hundred Years' War. About 1447, the Flegges' daughter Joan married Sir Theobald Gorges of Somerset, another knight of York's affinity who also accompanied him to France. Duke Richard generously supported the match, providing five hundred *livres tournois* and two hundred *salus d'or*. John and Agatha Flegge jointly held from Richard several grants of land, principally in the honour of Clare, where Flegge was the duke's bailiff until at least the 1460's. Later, Flegge served as farmer of the ulnage, or collector of tax on the sale of woollen cloth. In short, Agatha Flegge's husband was an important military and domestic functionary for Richard of York, and the couple obviously would have supported Yorkist interests.

The prologue to the life of St Anne says that this legend was written “for your sake, my frende Denston Kateryne” (1466), and proceeds to beg the saint’s influence “to our bothe confort & solace” (1469-80). Both prologue and legend are in Troilus stanza, and the last stanza of the legend broadens the dedication to include the lady’s family: her husband, John Denston, and their “young and fayre” daughter, Anne. There is also a prayer for “a son of their body before they die” (2092-8). John Denston was coroner and justice of the peace in the Clare neighbourhood; with other businessmen he negotiated a loan to King Henry VI. He died in 1473 after founding a chantry college in the village of Denston, that is, endowing a group of priests who would chant masses for the deceased founder. Denston did well for himself in marrying Katherine Clopton, daughter of Sir William Clopton of Long Melford. Her half-brother John Clopton was soon to be an important person in the area: sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk in the early 1450’s, executor to many important men, and a major church benefactor.<sup>6</sup> The famous Long Melford Church, not far from Clare, houses a Clopton chantry chapel. Several Cloptons are buried there, and the windows still show a portrait of John Denston with his and Katherine’s daughter who, despite Bokenham’s prayers, remained their only heir.

Katherine Clopton Denston was probably the intermediary through whom Bokenham met another friend and perhaps patron—her uncle by marriage, John Baret. Baret was a successful clothier, landowner, financier, and civic leader in Bury, a major market town and ecclesiastical centre about fifteen miles from Clare. Whether as confessor, beadsman, or literate friend, Bokenham was well acquainted with the wealthy merchant, for in his 1463 will, Baret left him a modest, but not stingy, personal bequest.<sup>7</sup>

In the stanzaic prologue (6465-6) to his life of St Katherine, and again near its conclusion, Bokenham dedicates the poem to “thi katerynys two, / Howard & Denstoun,” for whom the poet writes that he translated this life “in dayis fyve” (7363-7). The linkage here between Katherine Clopton Denston and Katherine Howard suggests that they were close enough friends to share the reading of this legend, and possibly even other readings devotional or secular in an ongoing reading circle of neighborhood gentrywomen. The comfort extended to Katherine Clopton Denston is probably for the death of her father, William Clopton, in 1446, the year in which

Bokenham most probably composed his version of the legend; Katherine Howard, too, may have experienced the death of a relative.

Katherine Howard was the daughter of William, Lord Moleyns, from the nearby village of Stoke Poges; he died at the siege of Orléans in 1429. The ubiquitous Thomas Chaucer, son of the poet, held her sister Eleanor's wardship. Her relationship with the Clare convent was particularly close, for in 1445 she received a letter of confraternity, an acknowledgment by the Augustinians of the contributions of important benefactors involving a kind of lay spiritual membership in the order. Katherine married John Howard, a strong Yorkist later distinguished in the service of Edward IV, Richard of York's eldest son. Howard had estates concentrated around Clare. Eventually made the duke of Norfolk, Howard was a patron of the arts, a book collector, and ancestor to the Tudor poet Henry Howard, earl of Surrey. Katherine did not live to see her husband's eventual success, for she died in 1465.<sup>8</sup>

Katherine Howard's daughter Elizabeth was another of Bokenham's patrons. The prolocutory to *Magdalene* specifies her as the commissioner of Bokenham's verse life of *St Elizabeth of Hungary* (5049-61). Twice in the *Elizabeth* material itself she appears: at the end of the prologue, where her name emphatically appears as the last three words, "dame Elyzabeth ver" (9534-6), and at length in an eight-line stanza which closes both this life and the legendary as a whole (10609-16). Elizabeth Howard had married John Vere, twelfth earl of Oxford, when both parties were very young, in their teens (about 1425). This was not, for financial reasons, the match the king's counsellors intended for the young nobleman, and Vere was fined 2000 l. for marrying without royal permission. He appealed, lost the case, and spent years paying the fine.<sup>9</sup> This real-life love match repeats, in a convenient coincidence, the legend of the saint whose name the countess has. Elizabeth of Hungary and her German husband lived, according to the legend, in exceedingly harmonious domesticity despite opposition to their marriage. Though Bokenham emphasises the foreign couple's mutual affection in his legend of Elizabeth, he tactfully omits the element of opposition that was so central to his patron Elizabeth's life. In 1441 the countess of Oxford accompanied her husband to Rouen as part of the retinue of Richard duke of York, which also included Richard's sister Isabel Bouchier and her husband Henry Bouchier. About twenty years later, in 1462, Elizabeth Vere would suffer a tragedy—the loss of both her husband and her son Aubrey to a charge of

treason, both accused in the same plot as that which embroiled John Clopton. The Veres, father and son, were executed at the Tower and buried before the high altar in Austin Friars, London.

Finally, Bokenham boasts above all of his friendship with the most highly-placed and wellborn of his patrons: Lady Isabel Bouchier, countess of Eu, the only one of the six women named in the legendary who was born into the nobility. Nor was this simply a question of nobility, for Lady Isabel had royal blood, being descended from Edward III in both the maternal line (through Lionel of Clarence) and the paternal (through Edmund of Langley). Furthermore, another ancestor in the paternal line was Pedro, king of Castile, a point which Bokenham emphasises in the pedigree he inserts into the Magdalene prolocutory. Apart from her lineage, Isabel married into one of England's most influential families, the Bouchiers (or Bowser, according to Bokenham). Her husband, Henry Bouchier, was also a descendant of Edward III, his brother was archbishop and cardinal, and Henry himself became treasurer of England a few years after Bokenham completed the legendary. Isabel's father, Richard earl of Cambridge, had been beheaded by Henry V in 1415 as a result of the Southampton plot, an alleged treasonous attempt to place Cambridge's brother-in-law, Edmund Mortimer, on the throne in place of the son of the usurper Lancastrian, Henry IV. Isabel was also sister to Richard duke of York, "in eгал degree" (5008). Richard was one of the wealthiest peers in England, with vast territories and considerable popular support. He was also, as lord of the honour of Clare, landlord of Clare Priory and of much of the surrounding neighborhood. Richard was counsellor to Henry VI and military commander in France in 1445 when this legend of the Magdalene was commissioned by his sister and composed by Bokenham.

Small wonder, then, that the legend Isabel requested should celebrate her in person and not just by implication. Bokenham, looking to accrue honour for himself and his order, sets off this legend both rhetorically and poetically as the showpiece of the collection. The longest in the collection and the only legend with three parts, the Magdalene has a prolocutory as well as the usual prologue and the life. Mathematically at the centre of the text, this life marks the midpoint of the legendary. It is also a poetic *tour de force*, for though the prolocutory is in couplets, and thereby comparable to much of the rest of the legendary, the prologue is in a distinctive eight-line

stanza (ababbcbc but sometimes ababbaba) and the legend itself is in Troilus stanza (ababbcc). The Magdalene is the locus of explicit authorial self-referentiality as well as deliberate virtuosity, for here the poet asserts his literary credo and lists the legends he has already composed. Lady Isabel is also the only one of Bokenham's six patrons whose own voice appears in direct dialogue (5065-75). Her speech reveals her lifelong devotion to Mary Magdalene, "of apostyls the apostyllesse" (5068), and she courteously requests an English version of the saint's life. The lady speaks within an artfully-developed, rhetorically-sophisticated, and charmingly-rendered commissioning scene—itsself a rarity in the annals of literary matronage or patronage.

Isabel and her family lived at Clare Castle, next to Clare Priory. There were substantial religious and social connections between the two buildings; for example, in the Magdalene prolocutory, Bokenham gives a first-person report of the gay scene at the castle on Twelfth Night in 1445 during which, amid the singing and dancing, Lady Bouchier commissioned this translation from her ecclesiastical guest. The poet observes Isabel's "four sonys ying / Besy...wyth revel & wyth daunsyng" (5023-24) among the many guests dressed "in there most fressh aray" (5025). Isabel would have six sons in all, three of whom were to die in the Wars of the Roses. Besides being literary patrons of the friar, Isabel and her husband were also benefactors of Clare Priory. In 1454, for example, Henry Bouchier was the principal organiser of a group donation of twelve acres, in return for which the friars were to sing a daily mass for duke Richard, his family, and the other donors.<sup>10</sup> In a variety of ways, then, Bokenham marks the importance of this legend and this patron—to himself, to his order, and possibly (in his view) to the future of England.

In what precedes, much of the biographical information about Bokenham's named women friends and patrons is really about male relatives and friends—most especially, about Richard duke of York and his affinity. This is, of course, the paradox with which this paper opened. On the one hand, the fifteenth century, especially in East Anglia, witnessed an unprecedented flowering in the cultural role of women. The material base for this increased participation was the economic prosperity of a particular area in a particular period, a prosperity to which many women contributed as artisans, as wealthy business figures, and as landowners either in their own right or jointly with their spouses. Moreover, as I have argued at greater length elsewhere, the political agenda of fifteenth-century England was deeply concerned with dynastic

politics, and particularly with the matrilineal claim of Richard of York to the throne.<sup>11</sup> This matrilineal descent motivates the Yorkist propaganda evident in Bokenham's all-female legendary, since the friar seeks to prove, on behalf of his landlord and most powerful patron, the value of woman's nature and contributions to society. Thirteen years after Bokenham completed the legendary, Richard of York successfully pressed his claim in Parliament; that is, the Yorkist matrilineal claim was publicly and legally acknowledged as superior to the patrilineal Lancastrian genealogy because its origin was an older son of Edward III than the other. Lionel of Clarence was older than John of Gaunt; his descendants of the house of York, despite the claim's descent through a woman, superseded the descendants of the house of Lancaster. Unfortunately, Richard died before he could take the throne, and his son, ruling as Edward IV, took it in his stead.

On the other hand, despite Bokenham's evident pro-woman sentiment and the real economic and cultural activity by women, there is no suggestion by Bokenham that Richard's elder sister Isabel, wife to Henry Bouchier, might be an appropriate candidate for the throne, even one more appropriate than her younger brother Richard. Were her sex irrelevant, as the Parliament decided it was with respect to Richard's ancestry, then Isabel, the elder by two years, would have been the successful claimant.

The women readers and patrons named in Bokenham's legendary bear witness—but ambiguous witness—to the political role of women in the fifteenth century. Their presence in the text suggests the social life and literary tastes of these East Anglian women of the gentry and the nobility. We can make some inferences about friendships, neighbourhood networks of association, relations of laypeople and clergy or those of capital and shire, and even about their interest in genealogy. Nonetheless, even here we must “by indirection find direction out,” for the importance of these women to the poet depends upon dynastic politics and social conflicts, matters in which their husbands, sons, and fathers participated but from which they were excluded—much as they were excluded from university life and the ordained clergy. These women, because of their loyalty to Richard of York, acted as patrons to a Yorkist friar. Although Elizabeth Howard de Vere's husband and son were, much later, accused of pro-Lancastrian conspiracy and treason, the connection between her and Bokenham was evidently based on her parents' Yorkist commitment—a commit-

ment which she followed in preference to her husband's Lancastrian sympathies. This may, therefore, be a revealing instance of national dynastic politics dividing a married couple, and one in which the wife sustained and acted upon her own sympathies.

Osbern Bokenham's women patrons manifest a genuine social ambiguity about women in fifteenth-century English society. The women who commissioned parts of his legendary were both genuine patrons and friends who were women; their importance to Bokenham and his priory lay in a complex network of family, social, and political connections—connections centred upon the landlord of Clare, the eventually successful claimant to the English throne, Richard duke of York. With Bokenham, it is both matronage and patronage.

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## Notes

1 For the legendary see Mary Serjeantson, ed., *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* by Osbern Bokenham, Early English Text Society, original series 206 (London, 1938), and Sheila Delany, trans. *A legend of holy women* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1992). For a full-length study see my *Impolitic bodies. Poetry, saints and society in fifteenth century England. The work of Osbern Bokenham* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998). The factual material in this paper derives from that study, but the focus of the analysis is quite different.

2 The *quid pro quo* could also have been personal, since Augustinian friars—or at least masters of theology in the order, as Bokenham was—were permitted the *peculium*, private money or personal possessions. The relationship could therefore have been with Bokenham himself as confessor or spiritual advisor.

3 I am indebted to Felice Lifshitz for this term, which figured in the title of the panel she organised at Leeds in 1998. An earlier version of this paper was given as part of that session.

4 Francis Roth identifies this friend with the Thomas Burgh who was prior of the Cambridge Austin house in 1440; see *The English Austin Friars*, 2 vols (New York: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1961), I, pp. 253, 520. According to the colophon, Burgh caused the legendary to be copied in 1447 at a cost of thirty shillings,



and gave it to a convent in memory of his sister, Dame Beatrice Burgh.

5 On Flegge, see Anne Marshall, "The Role of English war captains in England and Normandy, 1436-1461" (M.A. thesis, Swansea University, 1975), pp. 73, 235, 241; P.A. Johnson, *Duke Richard of York, 1411-1460* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 232; and Gladys Thornton, *A History of Clare, Suffolk* (Cambridge: Heffer and Son, 1930), p. 148.

6 Katherine's half-brother was notorious in East Anglia, if the Pastons' distrust is typical. In 1451, Margaret Paston advised her husband to "trust not to the sheriff for no fair language," and again in 1470 the Pastons warn one another to "be well ware of Clopton." There was an abortive engagement with a Paston in 1454, when Clopton and John Denston, Katherine's husband, attempted to negotiate a property settlement with the Pastons: *The Paston Letters*, ed. John Warrington. 2 vols (London: Dent, 1924), I, pp. 60-85 and II, p. 103. In 1461, Clopton was arrested, along with several others, on suspicion of having treasonably received letters from Margaret, queen of Henry VI, who was in exile in Scotland. All save Clopton were beheaded in London in 1462; he survived until 1498. His Lancastrian sympathies did not, however, affect his entire family. On Denston, see William Cooke, *The College or Chantry of Denston* (London: Dent, 1924; rep. 1961).

7 Bokenham does not mention Baret. For the will see Samuel Tymms, ed. *Wills and Inventories...of Bury St. Edmunds* (London: Camden Society, 1850; rep. New York: AMS Press, 1968).

8 On Katherine Howard, see Roth, *English Austin Friars*, I, pp. 212-214 and II, p. 327; and K.B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Hambleton, 1981), p. 99n.

9 For the legal situation see Ralph A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI* (London: Benn, 1981), p. 101. The fine was 3,000 marks.

10 See Roth, *English Austin Friars*, II, p. 334, and also II, p. 337, dated 1464, in which Isabel and Henry Bouchier are granted a chantry "in return for their numerous benefits" to the priory. This document is signed by, among others, Bokenham.

11 See my *Impolitic Bodies*, pp. 144-59.