

Melinda Ellison. "Her Book Not His": Women and Their Book Collections in Medieval And Early Modern Europe. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. July, 2001. 77 pages. Advisor: Jerry Saye.

This paper examines book ownership by women in the medieval and early modern periods in Europe. The primary aim of this paper is to synthesize the diverse and fragmentary scholarship on women book collectors in an accessible single source. The secondary aim is to provide an historical overview of the changing social practices of European women who owned libraries, as those practices developed from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries. This paper summarizes existing research into a coherent narrative that describes and explains the histories and contexts of women book collectors throughout Europe, with a focus on the issues and problems of scholarship on book ownership. Topics discussed include the history of books, women's role in the growth of vernacular literature, how women accessed and acquired books, determining book ownership among women, women's literacy, and books written or produced for women. Specific examples and case studies are used to illustrate selected issues, problems, and topics.

Headings:

Book Collectors

Women book collectors

Women – History – Middle Ages, 500-1500

Women – History – Renaissance, 1450-1600

Women – History – Modern Period, 1600-

“HER BOOK NOT HIS”:
WOMEN AND THEIR BOOK COLLECTIONS IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

by
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A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty
of the School of Information and Library Science
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in
Library Science

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

July, 2001

Approved by:

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PART I:

INTRODUCTIONOverview

In a surviving copy of the seventeenth century English publication, *Culpepper's Directory for Midwives*, the phrase "Elizabeth Hunt her book not his" has been written in three places throughout it. From this statement, it is apparent that Elizabeth Hunt intended to proclaim herself, not her husband, as the owner of the book. Despite Hunt's determination and the fact that women have been book owners for centuries, the history of women as book collectors, especially before the nineteenth century, is largely absent from library literature. This is a curious absence since ample evidence exists for women's libraries in the form of property inventories, records of commissions, letters, paintings, and other historical documents. This fact raises a number of questions: Who were these "absent" women who collected books? What did they collect? Where and when did their libraries emerge? How were their books obtained? How can we determine the contents of a woman's library? Did books figure into women's creation of public identities? What do the answers to these and other questions tell us about the changing roles of women and books in their cultures? The history of books and libraries will remain incomplete until the answers to these questions are found and related issues are examined. "Libraries form a handy index to their cultural milieu,"¹ and studying the formation of women's libraries will help illuminate our knowledge of social and intellectual

¹ Isobel Grundy, "Books and the Woman: The Eighteenth-Century Owner and her Libraries," *English Studies in Canada* 20, no. 1 (1994): 1.

development in various times and places. This paper will examine book ownership by women in the medieval and early modern periods in Europe, eras in women's history of books and libraries that have received less scholarly attention in comparison to the women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² The importance and relevance of this research lies in its originality. The primary aim of this paper is to synthesize the diverse and fragmentary scholarship in an accessible single source. The secondary aim is to provide an overview of the changing social practices of European women who owned libraries, as those practices developed through history from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries. The scholarly literature is dominated by a few highly specific studies on individual collectors—with large gaps in coverage. Performing content analysis on existing scholarship will contribute to library literature by creating an original synthesis of disparate material. This paper will summarize existing research into a coherent narrative that describes and explains the history and context of women book collectors throughout Europe, focusing on the issues and problems connected with scholarship on book ownership.

This history will be detailed in some areas and less detailed in others due to the uneven state of scholarly publications dealing with women collectors. Much of the research is not geographically oriented, while some articles are geared towards a specific region or country, mostly Great Britain. Some topics of discussion do not lend themselves to a national focus, while others do. For some areas, such as British

² For purposes of this essay, the chronological definitions of “medieval” or “Middle Ages” will be used to refer to the ninth to fifteenth centuries, with the emphasis being on the “late” period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries inclusive. The “early modern period” is a broad term to define referring to the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. For excellent sources of reference about medieval and early modern women, see Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), and Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to Present*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

collectors of the sixteenth century, a great deal is known; for others, such as German women of the eighteenth century, very little has been published. Thus, an attempt to cover each country exhaustively or equally will not be made. Because paper is attempting to synthesize previously published material, it is bound by the coverage and focuses of that material.

This paper is not organized by strictly chronological or geographical categories because of the difficulty assigning clear-cut temporal or national divisions. Many cultural tendencies ranged across centuries, and it would be misleading to try to chronologically organize the issues and problems. Geographic divisions are not always clearly defined either since noblewomen often moved to other regions or countries as brides. In her analysis of medieval women book owners, Susan Groag Bell notes the impossibility of considering each book owner in terms of a single nationality, unless carrying out a case study of one woman who never moved when she married.³ This cultural diffusion is further complicated by the difference in social progress between nations at any given time. The Renaissance in Italy, for example, began in the fifteenth century, but not until the sixteenth century in Germany and England.

Differentiating between the terms “owning,” “collecting,” and “private library” is complicated; none of the authors whose works were consulted approached the task of distinguishing one from the other. Perhaps that is because such an undertaking is subjective and highly contextual. Although it is easy to categorize large numbers of books owned by one person as a “collection,” small numbers may

³ Susan Groag Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture,” in *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, eds. J. M. Bennett et al (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 135-161.

also qualify for the designation. For example, in the Middle Ages when books were hand-copied, expensive, and relatively rare, a collection could conceivably consist of a smaller numbers of books. In the early modern era, the printing press had been invented and books were more affordable and plentiful. A woman's financial status is also indicative of what constitutes a collection: a woman from the lower classes would have neither the funds nor the space to house a library of the size of a noblewoman. Still, she may believe that her books constitute a collection, and that she has her own private library. Because of the complexity and subtleties involved, this paper will follow the lead of the scholars and not differentiate between the terms of "owning," "collecting," and "private library," using them interchangeably.

Writing Women's History

The second feminist wave during the 1960s served as a catalyst for a renewed interest in women's lives and the social roles they have played throughout time. Historians from many disciplines set out to identify the contributions that women made in all areas of knowledge and cultural history, most of which had been previously neglected or marginalized. Using what has become known as a feminist methodological approach, scholars from virtually all disciplines have revised historical accounts over the past twenty to thirty years to accurately reflect evidence of women's contributions to knowledge, culture, and society.

Literature is one area that has received significant attention from feminist research. Early studies were primarily focused on identifying lesser-known female writers and bringing attention to their work. Also examined were the ways in which women were depicted in literature, especially in terms of conforming to types, and

how literature was used for didactic and prescriptive patriarchal purposes. Later research studied women as readers, focusing on their preferred genres, popular titles, and other reading habits. The next logical progression in this expansion of knowledge leads to the books themselves and to their relation with the women who collected them. This paper will continue feminist historical research by investigating the history of women as book collectors in Europe before 1800.

Many scholars note that despite the restrictions on women's lives and actions in the Middle Ages—primarily a lack of economic opportunities and a surfeit of familial obligations—women sometimes managed to subvert these restrictions and venture into realms not easily accessible to them. Reading was one of these realms. Women read in private, or created ad-hoc private communities dedicated to literature. For instance, mothers, daughters, and friends would share books among each other, independently of the collections belonging to their husbands or fathers. As well, by creating a culture of female literacy, medieval women helped redefine femininity: for example, Bell draws attention to the unprecedented images of the Virgin Mary as a reader that appeared most prominently in the fifteenth century. Some authors also point out familiar methodological problems with studying women's lives and women book collectors: the scarcity of archival evidence and the unreliability of many extant documents. In response, they suggest that an attempt should be made to reconstruct women's lives holistically, by drawing on a wide variety of contemporary sources, from legal documents to memoirs, to medical treatises.

Early Research on Book Collecting

Research on book collecting dates back as far as the nineteenth century. Although a number of such early works remain available to modern scholars of book collecting and women's history, these older sources have several drawbacks, chiefly that they do not provide information that modern scholars find useful; instead, they are brimming full of interesting, but less relevant facts.

For instance, Hazlitt's 1904 opus, *The Book Collector*, is written in a characteristically nineteenth century manner.⁴ Each chapter contains a great many observations about a variety of issues; in other words, there is little order and organization of the material for the chapters. Hazlitt's text is largely centered on the biographies of a number of individuals he thought to be exemplary. This biographical approach has the effect of placing the idiosyncratic preferences of personal collectors at the center of scholarly study. Hazlitt's text is thus a series of short histories of "great men" to whom the reader is presumed to relate. He provides very little synthetic information about the libraries these men amassed; it is also presumed that the reader will be fully conversant with the particular ancient texts and their social value.

Hazlitt has very little to say about women collectors. Women's collecting merits a paragraph running across two pages. In Hazlitt's opinion, there were a number of notable women collectors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but lamentably few today (that is, in 1904). Those few twentieth-century collectors worth

⁴ William Carew Hazlitt, *The Book Collector: A General Survey of the Pursuit and of Those Who Have Engaged in it at Home and Abroad from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London, J. Grant, 1904). Hazlitt has also compiled an inventory list of names in *A Roll of Honour: A Calendar of the Names of Over 17,000 Men and Women Who Throughout the British Isles and in our Early Colonies Have Collected Mss. and Printed Books from the XIVth to the XIXth Century* (1908; reprint, New York: B. Franklin, 1971).

mentioning he simply notes by name.⁵ Partly, Hazlitt's reluctance to address the subject of women's book collecting is due to the paucity of information available on women's collections at the turn of the century—an issue that the author laments in his text.

Similarly, Ernest Quentin Bauchart's 1886 study, *Les femmes bibliophiles de France*, is based even more in biography.⁶ His two-volume work consists of a series of brief essays on the life and collecting of aristocratic individuals, followed by a list of the books that each woman owned. The coats of arms and *imprese* of each woman are faithfully reproduced. There is virtually no attempt at historical synthesis—no large conclusions drawn about patterns of collecting practice over time.

However, there is a focus on the "femininity" of many of the collectors he includes.

Bauchart's text does serve to prove the importance of Bell's observation that women collectors moved across Europe and transmitted literary values with them. That is, many of the women that Bauchart includes as French were born and raised in other regions of Europe; they moved to France, as they became wives of French aristocrats. Curiously then, Bauchart's nationalistic frame for his text is undermined somewhat by the very subject he chose to study.

James Westfall Thompson's research of the 1930s published in *The Medieval Library* is also problematic for modern scholarship.⁷ Thompson's survey attempts to cover institutional libraries across all of Europe in the Middle Ages. Thompson

⁵ Hazlitt, *The Book Collector*, 24-25.

⁶ Ernest Quentin Bauchart, *Les femmes bibliophiles de France, (XVIe, XVIIe, & XVIIIe siècles)*, 2 vols. (Paris: 1886). For a similar biographically- and inventory-based work, see Albert Cim, *Les femmes et les livres* (Paris: 1919).

⁷ James Westfall Thompson, *The Medieval Library*, The University of Chicago Studies in Library Science (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1939; reprint, New York; London: Hafner Publishing Company, 1965).

focuses on institutions because of their relative permanence and the likelihood of finding documentary evidence relating to them. Women and their collections are barely mentioned. There are a few scattered references to individual collectors, but these references are no longer than a paragraph. Again, this lack of discussion is likely probably a result of the paucity of direct documentary evidence of these women's collections. However, Thompson's survey has advantages over the earlier nineteenth-century sources; its main virtue is its synthetic quality, drawing broad conclusions about a wide range of collections and about large-scale social change. The text is reminiscent of the humanistic historical studies of the German tradition.

In the past, scholars have not paid much attention to women as book owners, resulting in a literature that almost exclusively pertains to the collections owned by men. Despite the existence of women's names in wills, inventories and catalogs, women were absent from the history of book owners and their libraries, with a few notable exceptions. In 1982, Bell published what may be the first paper that focused on women as book owners and the issues and contexts that affected aspects of their collections. She focused on laywomen (as opposed to religious women) in Europe from 800 – 1500, and found evidence that 242 women owned books.⁸ After Bell's seminal work, publications by scholars from a variety of disciplines began to appear, addressing one collector, one country, or one title in particular. Over the past two decades, scholars have looked at women's libraries, and women collectors are taking their place alongside men in the literature that dealt formerly only with men's collections. Researchers have delved into archives and have traced ownership of books back through centuries, thus dramatically advancing our knowledge of

⁸ For a chart that details the figures of women book owners, see Bell, 139.

women's personal libraries. This master's paper will look at research done by these scholars in order to try to understand the multi-faceted issues that must be considered when studying women from centuries past as book owners.

Convent Collections

Although much research exists on the literary habits of ecclesiastical women, this paper will not address putative book collecting among nuns. There are two reasons for this omission.

First, this paper is on private book collectors. Focusing on private collections presupposes a working definition of collecting: an individual woman creating a practice of acquisition based in her own personal desire. Nuns and cloistered women led communal lives where private property was either minimal or non-existent. While nuns were for centuries among the most literate and scholarly of women, they cannot properly be called collectors, for the necessary individualism is absent from their practice.

Second, a key distinction can be made between the essentially private nature of personal collections and the public nature of ecclesiastic collections. In nearly all cases, any nun from a particular convent had access to all of the books in its library. The collections kept therein were thus public and were not owned by any one person. Even when a novice was allowed to bring her books with her to her new convent, they became communal property rather than individual. Similarly, when books were donated (often by women) to convents, they became part of the more public context of that library. Thus, in researching literary practices among

ecclesiastical women, it is relatively easy to find evidence of high degrees of literacy and great erudition, but it is much harder to find evidence of individual collecting.

Because this paper deals with private book ownership and private libraries, the rich topic of literary pursuits among ecclesiastical women will be left for other scholars to chronicle.

* * * * *

In order to study women as collectors of books, it is necessary to consider various issues that factored into all aspects of book ownership. First, there will be a thumbnail sketch of the history of books, including discussions of format, price, the growth of vernacular literature, and the role women played in its expansion. Next will be a discussion of the locations where women could access books, and how they acquired them for their own personal libraries. Wills will receive a special emphasis in this discussion. From there, there will be a presentation of the major issues and problems faced by scholars when trying to determine book ownership. Specific studies will be reviewed to illustrate some of these matters. Following that, views about women's literacy and of the difficulty in determining readership will be offered. Also in this section will be a discussion pertaining to the issues concerning books written specifically for women. Next, four short case studies will be portrayed in an effort to further illustrate general points made throughout the paper. The paper will close by offering a summary and concluding remarks that the reader will hopefully find useful for future research and study.

PART II:

HISTORY OF BOOKS AND THE GROWTH OF VERNACULAR LITERATURE

History of Books

Before 1453, medieval books were in the form of manuscripts, comprised of handwritten rolls or bound pages. Then, the earliest printed books (known as “incunabula”) were produced between 1453 and 1500. Printers were still strongly influenced by the medieval manuscripts, and they used large type resembling the handwritten letters of the earlier books. These early books were printed on fine handmade paper or on a high quality treated animal skin called parchment, and many of the pages were also decorated by hand. After 1500, there were further developments in printing and by the end of the century. Books then looked much as they do today in that printers had stopped imitating manuscripts of the Middle Ages. They produced smaller-sized books that were inexpensive and easy to carry.⁹

Early books were costly because of the high cost of using parchment and gold leaf. The wages paid to scribes was the lowest expense of producing manuscripts; they often received minimal room and board plus a small wage. The price of materials decreased, and manuscripts began to be produced more cheaply over the next few centuries. By the end of the fourteenth century, it was possible to purchase

⁹ For the purposes of this paper, the term “books” includes manuscripts and incunabula as well as printed texts.

some small publications and devotional texts for less than one shilling in England.¹⁰ This enabled the middle class, usually merchants, to purchase books. Up until then, only the wealthy could afford books. With the advent of moveable type and the printing press in the latter half of the fifteenth century, books became more affordable for people in the lower middle class.¹¹ The prices of books decreased while literacy and wealth increased with the rise of the middle class. Book ownership thus became possible for a greater segment of the population. Books became more affordable and hence, desirable.¹² By the seventeenth century, there was a virtual “population explosion in books” which translated economically into a reduction in average individual value and an increase in accessibility.¹³

In addition to lower prices, there are other reasons that help explain why literacy—and hence book ownership—increased gradually from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, and dramatically over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One of these reasons concerns the beginning of the shift from oral to written culture during the eleventh century. This new emphasis on the written word contributed significantly to the intellectual and literary renaissance of the twelfth century. Some scholars suggest parallels the great fifteenth-century Renaissance. Such developments can be considered to be the impetus by which literacy and ensuing book ownership was increased in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The rise of literacy can be attributed not only to the intellectual renaissance, but also to later

¹⁰ Bell, 140. Although prices had gone down, they were still prohibitive to most people.

¹¹ Bell, 141.

¹² Susan Cavanaugh, *A Study of Books Privately Owned in England, 1300-1450* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 19.

¹³ Grundy, 1.

scientific and technological developments. For example, eyeglasses to correct farsightedness were invented in the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century, the fireplace and chimney flue were improved, providing a smoke-free, warm comfortable environment. Window glass was also developed, permitting better visibility indoors. These developments provided people not only with improved vision but also warm, safe, better surroundings in which to read.¹⁴ Because of the intellectual shift and technological discoveries, literacy was on the rise, books were less expensive and more plentiful—and book owners of both genders increased.

Women and the Growth of Vernacular Literature

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the amount of vernacular literature increased substantially. According to Bell, women influenced this growth in four basic ways: as readers; as mothers in charge of childhood education; as literary patrons who commissioned books and translations; and as transmitters of literary culture across Europe.¹⁵

As readers, women depended almost exclusively on translations into the vernacular since most were not taught Latin as girls. By the mid-twelfth century, women were regularly commissioning translations of texts from the Latin. By the fifteenth century, translations proliferated and appeared in most women's book collections. The invention of the printing press increased the number of titles and

¹⁴ Bell, 139.

¹⁵ Bell, 136.

copies of books in the vernacular. From 1475 to 1640, multiple copies of at least 163 titles were produced specifically for women.¹⁶

Second, women were in charge of their children's early education, and needed to acquire books as teaching tools.¹⁷ Bell suggests that women were major influences in the transmission of culture since they chose the books from which to teach their daughters and also bequeathed to them their own books.

Women book owners also served to shape iconography. Bell posits that artists and iconographers throughout Europe began to portray Mary as a reader since this act presumably reflected the lives of their patrons. Images of the Virgin Mary reading began to appear in art on an increasing basis. This may have validated the act of reading for women in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Mary was the most important medieval feminine ideal and highest symbol of womanhood. Her appearance as a reader would have been influential on other women. Bell asserts "the developing association of the Virgin with books in fact coincides with the rise in numbers of women book owners during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries."¹⁸ This iconographical symbol conveyed that Mary was a reader; as a role model, Mary promoted the respectability of women who read.¹⁹

¹⁶ Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 174.

¹⁷ Latin was taught usually only to boys after their primary education, which was often provided at home. See Bell, 137.

¹⁸ Bell, 155.

¹⁹ For further discussion, see Madeline H. Caviness, "Anchoress, Abbess, and Queen: Donors and Patrons or Intercessors and Matrons?" in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 105-154, esp. 106 and 142. See also Sandra Penketh, "Women and Books of Hours," in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, eds. L. Smith and J. H. M. Taylor, *The British Library Studies in Medieval Culture* (London: British Library; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 266-281.

Fourth, women played a significant part in the international movement of literature, art, and the ideas transmitted in these cultural forms. More often than not, medieval noblewomen changed their cultural milieu when they married. Women from diverse European locations would take their belongings, including books, when they often journeyed across the Continent and the English Channel to get married. This fact indicates “important trends in the diffusion of medieval culture.”²⁰ “Their books are evidence of the influential role these women played as international disseminators of literary, artistic, and religious ideas.”²¹ Many marriages were arranged, and young brides were sent to foreign countries where they would accumulate books in their native and adopted vernacular tongues. Women commonly carried manuscripts and books in various languages in their trousseaux. Books were disseminated in foreign countries as women would make wedding gifts of their precious books, or bequeath them to female relatives. For example, Judith of Flanders moved to Britain to marry the Earl of Northumbria in 1051, where she acquired at least two English Gospels. After being widowed, she moved to Bavaria, and gave one of the highly decorated and bejeweled English gospels to her new daughter-in-law, who eventually took it to Italy.²² Sometimes the bride brought more than only her books to her new country. Anne of Bohemia took book illustrators with her from her homeland when she arrived in England to marry Richard II in 1382.

²⁰ Bell, 139.

²¹ Bell, 156.

²² Bell, 157.

Their type of book illustration has been recognized as unique and clearly influenced English artists, hence blurring the lines between English and Bohemian illustration.²³

Women of Scotland

A great deal of documentation exists about Scottish women and their manuscripts and books from the Middle Ages up to the Renaissance, but interpreting and gathering such data from across the centuries is difficult, for it is often in fragmented form. Three basic conclusions can be stated: the subject matter is greatly pious; some prominent families had a legacy of literacy in which both sexes participated; Scotland was culturally linked to France and England.”²⁴

Priscilla Bawcutt and Bridget Henisch's investigation of Scottish women book collectors demonstrates two important points. First, that women collectors existed across Europe in the fifteenth century; and second, that a lack of evidence for women collectors in one context does not prove their absence in another context. The authors look at the lives and collecting practices of three book collectors in fifteenth-century Europe: Margaret, Isabella, and Eleanor, daughters of King James I of Scotland. Of the three women, Margaret was the most avid collector of books, although Eleanor was also able to amass a large and influential collection.

The authors' case study demonstrates the spread of book collecting across Europe, since aristocratic women often married men from foreign countries.

Margaret wed the Dauphin of France, Isabella married the duke of Brittany, and

²³ Bell, 158.

²⁴ Priscilla Bawcutt, “‘My bright buke’: Women and their books in medieval and Renaissance Scotland,” in *Medieval women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain, Essays for Felicity Riddy*, eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Rosalynn Voaden, Arlyn Diamond, Ann Hutchison, Carol M. Meale, & L. Johnson, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts 3* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 34.

Eleanor wed the archduke of Austria-Tyrol. Thus, a few educated avid book collectors from one family could have deep impacts across much of Europe as they married and moved across the continent.²⁵ Bawcutt and Henisch point out that although these women were originally Scottish, there remains no evidence of their book collecting in Scotland. The ample evidence of Margaret, Isabella, and Eleanor's collecting can be found in the archives of the countries to which they moved. In this case, the evidence for Scottish women book collectors exists in France and Austria.²⁶

The cultural links that Scotland shares with England and France become apparent when studying these and other female book collectors. This is evident through the shared literary tastes among the three nations, and the likelihood that women may own titles in all three local languages.²⁷ For instance, three manuscripts of vernacular poetry belonging to a sixteenth-century woman collector are still extant, one each from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. “Written respectively in French, English, and Scots, they have a kind of emblematic significance, illustrating the varied strands in Scottish literary culture.”²⁸

Given the mobility of literate and active women collectors, it should therefore be no surprise to find that they had large impacts on the history of books and libraries.

²⁵ Priscilla Bawcutt and Bridget Henisch, “Scots Abroad in the Fifteenth Century: The Princesses Margaret, Isabella and Eleanor,” in *Women in Scotland, c. 1100-1750*, eds. Elizabeth Ewan and Maureen M. Meikle (East Linton, UK: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 51.

²⁶ Bawcutt and Henisch, 47.

²⁷ Bawcutt, 34.

²⁸ Bawcutt, 26.

PART III:
MODES OF ACCESS AND ACQUISITION

Accessing Books

Scholarly consensus indicates that there were three locations where women could access books: in convents, their own homes or, beginning in the seventeenth century, public libraries.

Caroline Bowden estimates that thousands of English women of all classes had access to the extensive libraries in convents. This would have had the effect of stimulating interest in book ownership, and most likely was instrumental in the formation of both small and large personal libraries of women.²⁹

Heidi Brayman Hackel has documented numerous references from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which note the use of small rooms in the home used for reading and storing books; these personal libraries were often referred to as “closets” in British homes, and were used largely by women. Hackel describes these closets as part of the general trend towards book ownership and literacy, noting how numerous spaces in the home began to be associated with books, from chests, to cupboards, then to entire rooms. The mentions of these closets in inventories and other records help to distinguish book ownership within a household since the term “closet” is almost always identified by gender; there can be no mistaking who owned

²⁹ Information gathered from personal correspondence from Caroline Bowden, September 10 and October 9, 2000.

books when inventories specifically note references to “my ladies book closett” and “books in my wyfes closet.”³⁰ These closets ranged from small rooms with limited furnishings to larger ones with fireplaces, desks, and other comforts. Closets were often nicely decorated with curtains and carpet, and sometimes also held items such as glass bottles, compasses, and scientific equipment.³¹

The seventeenth century was “an age of library expansion and achievement” in both public and private libraries throughout Europe, which suggests “confidence in and reverence for the project of book collection.”³² In France, Cardinal Mazarin founded the great Mazarine Library in Paris in 1643, which opened to the public. Ten years later, the first British library open to the public was founded in Manchester, England.³³ Grundy reports that the women members of the free or municipal libraries encountered active or visible prejudice.³⁴ The “free” library housed not only books, but also sold paper, perfume, and other miscellaneous items, which identified the institution as commercial and female, and therefore, “non-serious.” From her studies of women and libraries in the eighteenth century, Grundy asserts that lending libraries “inspired distrust and anxiety among the book-owning classes” who believed that books, especially fiction would “corrupt the young, the uneducated, and especially the female, who would feed their fantasy life and diminish their productive

³⁰ Heidi Brayman Hackel, “The Countess of Bridgewater’s London Library,” unpublished essay, 2.

³¹ Heidi Brayman Hackel, “‘Rowme’ of its own: Printed Drama in Early Libraries,” in *A New History of Early English Drama*, eds. J. D. Cox and D. S. Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 119.

³² Grundy, 1.

³³ Grundy, 2.

³⁴ Grundy, 2.

labor.”³⁵ There was an exclusionist attitude held by the upper classes toward public libraries. The long affinity of books, scholarship and seemed to be threatened by the close proximity of books with commercial enterprises and the “common man.”³⁶

Academic libraries are notably absent from the list of places where women could access books. For the most part, these were not places where either gender had extensive use of the books; in fact, in England, university students relied largely on privately owned books rather than academic libraries until the late nineteenth century.³⁷ One woman who was accepted as a “visitor” to Cambridge University was Mildred Cooke Cecil, Lady Burghley (1526-1589). She was known for her learnedness, resulting from the humanist education she received as child where she gained proficiency at Latin and Greek.³⁸ Because of her visitor status, Lady Burghley was not allowed to access the books at Cambridge. Instead, she formed an extensive library of her own of classical medical texts, devotional materials, and books of literature and politics.³⁹

Acquisition

Although we have evidence that many women of the upper class were literate and enjoyed reading, there is little extant scholarship about the exact circumstances under which each individual women obtained specific books and the criteria they

³⁵ Grundy, 2.

³⁶ Grundy, 2.

³⁷ Grundy, 1-2.

³⁸ Women could not attend Cambridge University in the sixteenth century; for a woman to be accepted as a visitor was probably the highest honour accorded at that time.

³⁹ Caroline Bowden has compiled a catalog of Lady Burghley’s private library, and has kindly provided me with an as yet unpublished catalog.

used to select them. We do know, however, the general circumstances by which women acquired books: as gifts, purchases, commissions, and bequests.⁴⁰ It is from the study of wills—and the issues and problems surrounding them—that we have gained most of our knowledge about women’s book collections.

Gifts were given as tokens of friendship, wedding presents, or objects intended to curry favor for political or social reasons. By the fourteenth century, books had joined the prized possessions of noble families, ranking with tapestries, jewels, and furniture. “Choice manuscripts became useful as gifts with which people could commemorate family or state occasions, honor a friend or relative, impress a member at court, or even influence the course of events.”⁴¹

Purchases are often conflated with commissions or patronage, but they should be considered as a separate category of acquisition altogether. Purchases could be made from another book owner or bookseller, independent of patronage. Carol Meale notes that some women were apparently able to purchase books from abroad in the same manner as men. For instance, French books were in considerable demand in England, and records sometimes indicate the popularity of particular books. Two of Christine de Pizan's texts were popular in the English court, and have been traced to the collections of two women.⁴² It is interesting to note that Meale discusses women collectors in the same terms as men collectors, as though there were few differences of access to the market between the genders.

⁴⁰ Bawcutt, 29.

⁴¹ Muriel Hughes, “The Library of Philip the Bold and Margaret of Flanders, First Valois Duke and Duchess of Burgundy,” *Journal of Medieval History* 4 (1978): 147-148.

⁴² Carol Meale, “Patrons, Buyers and Owners: Book Production and Social Status,” in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375-1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 208.

Commissions, on the other hand, were specifically tailored to the patron, who could select a particular copyist or writer to prepare a volume. It has been securely concluded that many women commissioned high-quality manuscripts and books. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, “many of the finest Psalters and books of hours were produced at the instigation of women.”⁴³ Nonetheless, knowledge of women’s patronage is imprecise since their commissioning of books was often done under the name of their husband or father.⁴⁴

A neglected area of women's patronage and collecting is the links that exist between individual women patrons of literature. Karen Jambeck argues that networks of contacts between patrons allowed them to create and maintain a literary culture that was passed exclusively between women.⁴⁵ This literary culture was shaped by the particular kinds of feminine virtues and strengths that were extolled in a number of key texts that she identifies. Women patrons, Jambeck argues, looked to the texts they read to help define their femininity. They selected particular notions of femininity by choosing which books to patronize and to pass on to their daughters.⁴⁶ Indeed, she cites a number of cases where there is strong evidence for daughters sharing the same literary tastes as their mothers, including the fact that they inherited their mothers' books. Overall, Jambeck's focus is on the communities

⁴³ Carol Meale, “‘ . . . all the bokes that I haue of latyn, englisch, and frensch’: Laywomen and Their Books in Late Medieval England,” in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 137.

⁴⁴ Mavis E. Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 72.

⁴⁵ Karen K. Jambeck, “Patterns of Women’s Literary Patronage: England, 1200-ca.1475,” in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 228.

⁴⁶ Jambeck, 229-232.

that women created between themselves, their daughters, granddaughters, nieces, cousins, aunts, and sisters.

Wills

Bequests are regarded as the means by which many women's private libraries began. One of the earliest book owning women we can identify is Gisela, granddaughter of Charlemagne and daughter of Louis the Pious (778-840), who was king of France and Holy Roman emperor. Gisela inherited books from her husband in the ninth century, but we do not know if she acquired any books other than those bequeathed to her. Women continued to inherit books from their fathers and husbands, but over the next six centuries, they increasingly acquired their collections by purchasing them outright or having books bequeathed to them by another woman. "By the end of the fifteenth century, women had become more frequent possessors of many types of books, which they had acquired through inheritance, through outright purchase from scribes and booksellers, and through commission."⁴⁷

In her studies about books bequeathed in wills, Susan Cavanaugh concluded that there are so many extant wills from medieval England, some which include book bequests, that no single person could possibly read them all in a lifetime. Therefore, wills will never likely be completely studied, and random samplings will be the primary resources used by scholars. Cavanaugh also notes that many books were not mentioned in wills, for a variety of reasons. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the extent of book ownership exclusively through wills.⁴⁸ Despite the incompleteness

⁴⁷ Bell, 145.

⁴⁸ Cavanaugh, 2-3.

of wills as records of book inventories, historians nonetheless use wills to represent cultural practice. Testamentary evidence gleaned from wills has aided scholars in their studies of the dissemination of literary genres and levels of literacy.

According to Margaret Deanesly, up to the mid-fifteenth century, there were not many books mentioned in English wills. Those that appeared were usually named or described on an individual basis. From the mid-fifteenth century on, when books became more abundant because of developments in printing, phrases such as “my other books” or “all my books” began to appear.⁴⁹ In her study of 7,568 English wills from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Deanesly found only 338 that mentioned books. Taking this evidence as indicative of book ownership, Deanesly pronounced that the “booklessness” was pervasive throughout the late medieval period in Britain. She did not carry out a more comprehensive study to determine book ownership, for it seemed her primary purpose was to study the contents of wills rather than to study book ownership. By not examining inventories, catalogs, or other records of past libraries such as individual marks of ownership, her conclusions regarding book ownership are erroneous. Other conclusions by Deanesly were, however, valuable. She noted that many more Latin titles were mentioned, relative to the number of those written in the vernacular (a point that will be addressed later in this section). Also, pious works were more numerous than secular ones.⁵⁰ A key point is the large number of times women were both those who made the bequeathals and those who were the bequeathed. It is especially noteworthy that

⁴⁹ Margaret Deanesly, “Vernacular Books in England in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Modern Language Review* 15, no. 4 (October 1920): 349.

⁵⁰ Deanesly, 349.

Deanesly found this evidence while not focusing exclusively on women. Her findings provide clear evidence of women as the owners of books.

Similar to Deanesly's findings were those of P.J.P. Goldberg's study of 2300 wills from York between 1321 and 1500. For example, surviving wills represented a minority of people, and less than five per cent of the wills mentioned books specifically. This corresponds with a study done in Norwich, England for roughly the same period. This is not surprising since in the late Middle Ages, book ownership was minimal relative to our modern times because of the low rates of literacy and the price of books. Both scholars also found that most books mentioned were religious in nature: Psalters, missals, primers, and books of hours. The titles of non-devotional books were rarely mentioned.⁵¹ The wills indicate "book ownership was not confined to the aristocracy and the clergy, but encompassed also the upper echelons of urban society, notably merchants, their wives and widows, and to a lesser degree, substantial artisans."⁵² Women were both testamentary givers and receivers, suggesting that women's limited access to formal education did not impede their access to written material.

Joel Rosenthal also studied book bequests from extant wills dated between 1350 and 1500 in England, but focused on aristocratic cultural patronage. Rosenthal yielded different results than did Deanesly and Goldberg, almost surely because of the privileged economic status of his subjects. Rosenthal's study found records for 978 aristocratic individuals in England. Of these, there were extant wills for 38 percent of the men, and for 16 percent of the women. Within these

⁵¹ P.J.P. Goldberg, "Lay Book Ownership in Late Medieval York: The Evidence of Wills," *The Library*, 6th series, 16, no. 3 (1994): 182.

⁵² Goldberg, 189.

testaments, “18 percent of the male wills mention book bequests, and no less than 48 percent of the female ones do so.”⁵³ Rosenthal speculates that this could be due to wives outliving their husbands, and then being able to “dispose of personal goods in a context of considerable freedom.”⁵⁴ Considering that most women who wrote wills were widows, Rosenthal’s hypothesis is credible. Also valuable in this study are the findings about the size of book collections. In approximately 75 percent of the wills, there were references to three or fewer books. About 16 percent bequeathed four to six books, with the remaining 9 percent mentioning seven or more.⁵⁵ These findings are in general agreement with those of other scholars: that before the sixteenth century, few books were mentioned in wills, leading to the conclusion that book collections tended to be small.

There are problems when using wills to determine book ownership and to assess other related issues such as readership and literacy. The major problem is that not all books were listed individually in a person’s will. Proof of this can be found in the many cases when separate historical documentation has revealed that a person commissioned and owned a title, but it does not appear in his or her will. Wills may state only that the deceased is leaving “all my books” or “the remainder of my books” to a particular recipient.⁵⁶ Books named in wills are most likely to be those about which the owner had some “special feeling, instructions, or comment.”⁵⁷ Sometimes only genres or broad descriptions are stipulated in a will that provides

⁵³ Joel T. Rosenthal, “Aristocratic Cultural Patronage and Book Bequests, 1350-1500,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 64 (1981-82): 535.

⁵⁴ Rosenthal, 536.

⁵⁵ Rosenthal, 537.

⁵⁶ Cavanaugh, 14.

⁵⁷ Rosenthal, 535.

specific bequests. For example, Lady Alice West of Hampshire left the following items to her daughter-in-law Joan in 1395: “a masse book, and alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, english, and frensch.”⁵⁸

Books are not always mentioned in wills for five major reasons: one, often only devotional texts were mentioned; two, many married women didn't have wills; three, many books that belonged to women went automatically to other women without it being necessary to name the books in the will; four, not all wills are extant; and five, books could be listed in inventories instead.

First, devotional and Latin books were emphasized in wills, whereas secular and vernacular books were less likely to be mentioned.⁵⁹ There are several reasons for this. One is that this tendency probably underscored the learned and pious nature of the giver. Another reason was that was considered to be proper decorum to mention texts of religious devotion.⁶⁰ Further, as Cavanaugh suggests, liturgical books were “ideal gifts, since their use would simultaneously preserve the testator's memory and benefit his soul.”⁶¹ Many were willed to either churches or to individuals with the proviso that the books should be used to pray for the deceased. Meale agrees, noting that bequeathed devotional books would be used regularly and would thus prompt the recipient to remember the giver of the book.⁶² Another purpose was that religious books were often ornate and thus the most expensive to produce

⁵⁸ Cavanaugh, 14-15.

⁵⁹ Cavanaugh, 9.

⁶⁰ Religious books comprise over half the books mentioned in wills from both men and women from all social and economic walks of life. See Meale, *Laywomen and Their Books*, 131.

⁶¹ Cavanaugh, 10.

⁶² Meale, *Laywomen and Their Books*, 131.

during the Middle Ages, and their value—both aesthetic and monetary—merited their mention as specific testamentary gifts.⁶³

Second, although it has been acknowledged that wills do not give a full and accurate account of personal libraries of either gender, women's book ownership is especially problematic. In many parts of Europe during the Middle Ages, common law restricted a married woman from making a will and allowed a widower to claim all of his late wife's property."⁶⁴ Single or married women often did not leave wills because "the legal establishment in general deemed a woman's goods to belong to her father, if she were unmarried, or to her husband, while he lived."⁶⁵ There were some exceptions, however, which have helped scholars to use wills to research various cultural phenomena. Not surprisingly, the nobility and upper classes made most wills, and the middle or merchant classes left only occasional testaments. Of the wills left by women, most were by widows.

Third, in some traditions, women of certain cultures and eras inherited books from other women on a regular basis. For example, in Europe during the fifteenth century, books were part of a woman's *gerade* (the household goods she would normally inherit from her mother).⁶⁶ As well, in the Saxon culture, their cultural laws and customs of the tenth to thirteenth centuries were compiled in a treatise called *Sachsenspiegel* (The Mirror of the Saxons) in the early thirteenth century. It

⁶³ Cavanaugh, 10-11. Scholars agree virtually unanimously that expensive books from the medieval period cost proportionately more than our contemporary deluxe books.

⁶⁴ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 1.

⁶⁵ Caroline M. Barron, "The 'Golden Age' of Women in Medieval London," *Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989): 40.

⁶⁶ Josephine Koster Tavers, "'Thys ys my mystrys boke': English Women as Readers and Writers in Late Medieval England," in *The Uses of Manuscripts in Literary Studies: Essays in Memory of Judson Boyce Allen*, eds. Charlotte Cook Morse, Penelope Reed Doob and Marjorie Curry Woods, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 31, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 315-316.

addressed items of inheritance and the usual recipients of items not specifically bequeathed. Religious books owned by a woman were normally to be inherited by another woman since it was women who read them.⁶⁷ *Sachsenspiegel* was revised and translated over the next two centuries, and was transmitted throughout German-speaking lands and the non-Saxon area of what is now Russia. “The *Sachsenspiegel* clearly attests to women’s role in the transmission of culture, especially lay religious culture, and to the different reading habits and religious observances of men and women.”⁶⁸ It is important to emphasize that this lack of specific book bequests from mother to daughter is likely insignificant considering the customary nature of book inheritance as set out in the *Sachsenspiegel*. A woman did not need to specify that she wanted her books to be willed to her daughter; they automatically went to her. Fathers, on the other hand, did make a specific mention of such types of literary bequests since it was not as customary or for fathers to hand books down to their daughters.⁶⁹

Fourth, another difficulty in using wills to determine book ownership is the varying degrees of survival rates in different parts of each country during each period. Many wills have disappeared over the centuries, and thus the remainder does not provide scholars with as much information about a time and era that would be optimal for a research study.

A final problem is the use of household inventories to list individual book titles. “When both a will and inventory survive for a certain person, books often are

⁶⁷ Bell, 142.

⁶⁸ Bell, 142.

⁶⁹ Bell, 143.

mentioned only in the inventory."⁷⁰ In some places, inventories, not wills, were considered to be the appropriate venue for recording book titles; unfortunately, like wills, surviving inventories are often rare. It is in inventory documents where particulars about a book can be found, such as a description of its binding, the price, and other details not usually recorded in a will. Sometimes a will proclaims that a person's entire book collection should be bequeathed to another personal or public library, without mentioning any specific titles. This is evident in the case of John Scardeburgh of Northamptonshire, who lists only three books in his will. An inventory taken immediately after his death gave a total of twenty-six books in his library.⁷¹ Such a significant number of similar discrepancies exist so as to suggest that household lists can help to denote ownership. Book inventories can be compiled from a number of sources, such as a list of household accounts or library catalogs. An inventory list can be composed from notations in the actual books, but incompleteness is inherent in such an undertaking.

Anne Dutton argues that despite their problems, contemporary wills and legal documents can provide scholars with a great deal of information about women's book ownership in medieval Britain. Her research yields information on the social status of women book collectors, the kinds of religious texts they owned, and the changes that occurred before 1500. Her focus is not on women book collectors so much as it is on how women collectors passed their books on to friends, relatives and acquaintances.

⁷⁰ Cavanaugh, 5.

⁷¹ Cavanaugh, 15-16.

Dutton demonstrates that book ownership among women was limited to the aristocratic classes or sequestered religious orders until the mid-1400s. Later decades show a considerable increase in ownership by merchant and gentry women. Dutton argues that this cultural change followed economic shifts that made the merchants richer, and was also rooted in the merchant class' desire to look towards the minor aristocracy.⁷² Dutton also is able to analyze the types of literature that women owned; hagiographical texts were the most common, followed by didactic and meditative materials.⁷³ She finds no evidence that class origins affected the women's choices of what kinds of texts to collect. As well, women's use of religious texts was almost exclusively in the vernacular.⁷⁴ Dutton traces a shift from a predominance of French texts to a predominance of English as the aristocracy's dominance of collecting waned.

Overall, Dutton's work refutes the concerns of many scholars for the unreliability of wills and legal texts as documentary sources. She is able to draw a great deal of factual information from limited evidence, and adds considerably to modern knowledge of past collectors.

However, other issues and problems remain when considering book ownership, such as finding and assessing the proof, then determining its completeness and accuracy. These will be explored in the next section.

⁷² A.M. Dutton, "Passing the Book: Testamentary Transmissions of Religious Literature to and by Women in England," in *Women, the Book, and the Godly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference, 1993*, eds. L. Smith and J. H. M. Taylor (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 46.

⁷³ Dutton, 48.

⁷⁴ Dutton, 50.

PART IV:

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN DETERMINING BOOK OWNERSHIPIssues Concerning Ownership

According to Michelle P. Brown, “there is much evidence pointing to high standards of female literacy in pre-Alfredian England, and yet none of the few surviving manuscripts from the period c. 600-900 have been demonstrated conclusively to have been made by or for women.”⁷⁵ Finding proof about book ownership from the early medieval era is indeed difficult, but fortunately, evidence exists from later in the medieval period that shows conclusively that many women commissioned high-quality manuscripts and books.⁷⁶

Evidence from a number of sources must be considered when trying to establish book ownership from the medieval and early modern periods since proof of ownership is often fragmented and incomplete. For example, we may have records that a woman owned books, but we may not have a list of their titles. Instead, we might have records of how many of her household chests they filled or how much they cost.⁷⁷ There are several sources of information that can be considered by scholars: contemporary household inventories, inscriptions or marks, ownership stamps, handwritten signatures, references in journals and letters, public records or

⁷⁵ Michelle P. Brown, “Female Book Ownership in England During the Ninth Century: The Evidence of the Prayerbooks.” *Old English Newsletter* 28, no. 3 (spring 1995): A-57.

⁷⁶ Dr. Brown has not indicated how many women, either in number or by percentage, commissioned books—only that there were “many.”

⁷⁷ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 3.

notices, passages in the text of books that refer to specific ownership, representations in portraits, and bequests in wills. For example, some titles of books from the libraries of Ann, Countess of Coventry, and the Irish writer Elizabeth Freke (1641-1714), were not recorded in the library catalogs, but rather were found in household inventories.⁷⁸ Using multiple sources for determining ownership produces results that are more accurate.

Scholars often use inscriptions in individual books to compile catalogs of books that belonged to individuals when no list of holdings appears to be extant. Women's inscriptions may appear either in their own hand, by the hand of a clerk in her employ, or through an ownership seal. Heraldic devices are also used to inscribe ownership, but this can be problematic when determining if it was the man or the woman of the house who owned the book.

Library catalogs are helpful, but like most other means of establishing ownership, this method is not without its problems. In the medieval period, "books frequently contained many items bound in one cover, yet medieval catalogers seldom troubled to itemize each work in a manuscript," resulting in an incomplete list of holdings.⁷⁹ Hence, it can be concluded that book holdings were in fact greater than many sources have indicated. Cavanaugh has gone so far to say that in every case she has studied, medieval collections were actually larger than wills, inventories, and catalogs indicated.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Grundy, 3. For more information about the libraries of Ann, Countess of Coventry, and Elizabeth Freke, see Jacqueline Pearson, "Women Reading, Reading Women, in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700*, ed. H. Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82-83.

⁷⁹ Cavanaugh, 17.

⁸⁰ Cavanaugh, 19.

To determine book ownership in selected English regions between 1560 and 1640, Peter Clark used both inventory and household lists. In his case studies involving the communities of Canterbury, Faversham, and Maidstone, he found clear evidence for extensive book ownership among the wealthy elite. However, with people from the merchant and yeoman class, both women and men, Clark found less evidence.⁸¹ Nonetheless, he cites some examples: Elizabeth Baker, married to a yeoman in Otham, read every night before bed; one anonymous woman, wife of Bartholomew Dann, was assaulted by her husband because he felt she spent too much time reading.⁸²

Clark noted that the most extensive evidence for book ownership comes from the inventories of personal goods made when people died. However, the current research on these lists is not promising when it comes to finding evidence of book ownership among women. For instance, *Books in Cambridge Inventories: Book-Lists from Vice-Chancellor's Court Probate Inventories in the Tudor and Stuart Periods* lists only two women among hundreds of individuals.⁸³ *Private Libraries in Renaissance England: A Collection and Catalogue of Tudor and Early Stuart Book-Lists* lists no women book owners at all.⁸⁴ This absence of female collectors in these publications can be attributed to either an intentional or unintentional marginalization by past historians.

⁸¹ Clark, 95-97.

⁸² Clark, 97.

⁸³ See E.S. Leedham-Green, *Books in Cambridge Inventories: Book-Lists from Vice-Chancellor's Court Probate Inventories in the Tudor and Stuart Periods*, 2 vols. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁸⁴ See E.S. Leedham-Green, *Private Libraries in Renaissance England: A Collection and Catalogue of Tudor and Early Stuart Book-Lists*, 5 vols., *Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies* 87, 105, 117, 148, 189 (Binghamton, NY: Adam Matthew Publications, 1992).

Very few of the inventories that Clark used in his sample were made for women. He has little to say about their collections except that archival records no doubt under-represent women collectors because of several real-life factors. These factors include the possibility of widowers claiming their wives books as their own, the common practice of exchanging and trading one's books with friends, and the general negligence of the contemporary appraisers.⁸⁵ An important conclusion that Clark draws from his statistical sample is that after 1600, book ownership among women increased dramatically, largely doubling. For instance, in Canterbury, the percentages of women who owned books before 1600 versus those after 1600 were 14 and 29 percent respectively; for Maidstone, a similar increase was found over the same period, from 14 percent to 27 percent. However, in Faversham, the rate remained static at 21 percent. Among men, the percentage of book ownership remained relatively stable around 40 percent.⁸⁶ Clark attributes the increases in book ownership to the general spread of literacy among the population, especially women, up through the seventeenth century. While literacy spread, publishing also increased.⁸⁷

Overall, Clark suggests that book ownership in general was considerably more common in the countryside than in the urban center of London; the demographic distribution of ownership was also more widespread in the countryside, more often including the "lower ranks of respectable society."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Peter Clark, "The Ownership of Books in England, 1560-1640: The Example of Some Kentish Townsfolk," in *Schooling and Society: Studies in the History of Education*, ed. Lawrence Stone (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 98.

⁸⁶ Clark, 99.

⁸⁷ Clark, 105-108.

⁸⁸ Clark, 109.

John Carmi Parsons' investigations into assessing book ownership echo aspects of Bell's findings, regarding the role women played in the promotion of vernacular literature. He writes: "the importance of aristocratic patronage to the growth of vernacular literatures in the medieval period is no more open to dispute than is the dominant role women played in that process."⁸⁹ This is a clear and compelling statement in support of the notion that women had a strong influence on books and literary culture in the Middle Ages. However, Parsons tempers his statements with the caveat that possession and ownership remain to be proven even in the face of a direct dedication. That is, even when a book is dedicated to a patron, or a book is found in a personal library, scholars must find evidence that the owner or patron actually read the work in question.

Parsons describes a number of cases where he found direct evidence of patronage, ownership, and literary interest by thirteenth and fourteenth century queens in England. Using several evidentiary sources, including the extant parts of the women's collections, courtly records, and testimonies, Parsons tried to reconstruct the lives of selected historical women, often to the point of being able to discuss in detail if a particular woman book collector was familiar with a specific work of literature.

One of the ways that scholars can distinguish between passive ownership and active commissions is by determining if the female patron had a private scriptorium. If she had a private workshop dedicated to producing books under her name, then it can be safely assumed that she had a great deal of interest in literature and owned

⁸⁹ John Carmi Parsons, "Of Queens, Courts, and Books: Reflections on the Literary Patronage of Thirteenth-Century Plantagenet Queens," in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 175.

the books she commissioned.⁹⁰ Of course, it was also possible to purchase books individually from professional workshops, which some women did.

Parsons highlighted the unique social roles and possibilities open to aristocratic women book collectors. Because they may have been born and raised in another region or country, they were likely to be equipped with a multicultural sensibility that made them natural choices to become instructors to young women who, like them would also become international brides. Thus, there is strong evidence that women book collectors had a large influence on the literary culture of generations of pan-European aristocrats.⁹¹ Not only did the role of instructor create a "legacy" for women collectors, but also the social prestige that accrued to them as mentors enhanced their power to direct the lives and careers of their protégées.

Overall, Parsons disputes the oft-repeated idea that women collectors had less prestige and power due to a lack of schooling in Latin. He argues that literacy (and its related social roles) in the vernacular allowed women to accrue more real power than has traditionally been assumed.⁹² He generalized from his case studies to assert that similar literacy, social power, and cultural influence can be assumed for many aristocratic women of the highest ranks in this period—even when the evidence has been lost.

⁹⁰ Parsons, 179.

⁹¹ Parsons, 186.

⁹² Parsons, 187.

Problems in Determining Ownership

Scholars face a number of problems when trying to determine book ownership from past centuries. One problem is that books may have been incorrectly assigned to an owner, sometimes for fraudulent reasons. For example, the names of royalty and other wealthy, important citizenry have been applied to books intentionally to defraud the public and bring a higher price for the items.⁹³ A book with the provenance of Mary Queen of Scots would almost certainly fetch a higher price than a book previously owned by a person of lesser status. Other times, the incorrect attribution is the result of poor scholarship. Another problem is that indications of female ownership and readership have often been overlooked by previous editors and catalogers, and must be now painstakingly gathered by dedicated scholars.

A further problem in assigning ownership occurs when studying libraries in countries that experienced violence and upheaval during the Reformation (begun in 1517). There was “a massive destruction of archives, manuscripts, and printed books” as well as the loss of historical records that would have pointed to the existence of specific book ownership and the loss of many of the books themselves.⁹⁴ We know that the extant documentation is in many cases therefore incomplete and inconclusive as far as comprehensiveness and accuracy is concerned.

⁹³ Bawcutt, 19-20.

⁹⁴ Bawcutt, 19.

Another quandary is the difficulty in assigning ownership to books owned by married couples.⁹⁵ Some contemporary reports demonstrate the exact ownership of books within a household occupied by a married couple: the household accounts of the fifth earl of Northumberland differentiated between "my Lord's Library," and "my Lady's Library."⁹⁶ Issues concerning gender are a factor when researching reading and book ownership as they are integrated into households. Husbands were legally free to subsume the property of their wives, and evidence exists to show that women's book collections were "incorporated" into those of their husbands, even while the wife was alive.⁹⁷ This lack of differentiation makes it difficult for scholars to find readily available proof of women's book collections. For example, there is documentation that Nicholas Bacon made a gift of a book to Lady Jane Lumley in the mid-1570s, which was a common gesture amongst the nobility. This same book, however, was inscribed with the ownership mark of her husband.⁹⁸

Distinguishing a wife's books from those of her husband is difficult for other reasons as well. Family crests and other heraldic devices could denote ownership by either the husband or the wife, such as in the following problematic cases from the fifteenth century. The emblems of the Richard, Duke of York, appear in a copy of *Le cité des dames* by Christine de Pizan, who dedicated the book to women of all social classes. Does this mean that Richard owned the book, or that he purchased it as a gift for his wife, Cecily Neville, Duchess of York, who was renowned as a book

⁹⁵ For further information, see Ann J. Kettle, "'My Wife Shall Have It': Marriage and Property in the Wills and Testaments of Later Mediaeval England," in *Marriage and Property*, ed. Elizabeth M. Craik (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984), 89-103.

⁹⁶ Hackel, "Rowme" of Its Own, 118-119.

⁹⁷ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 1.

⁹⁸ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 2.

collector in her own right? Other times, the coats of arms or other devices from both husband and wife appear in the same book. In a copy of *The Regiment of Princes* and other works by the author Hoccleve, the arms of Joan Neville, Countess of Salisbury, and her husband, William Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, both appeared. Does this mean that the book was hers, or that it was purchased as a joint possession for the family library?⁹⁹ Or did one spouse add their arms some time after the other acquired it? Heraldic devices have often led to incorrect ownership assignments, such as occurred with a manuscript known as the “Wingfield Hours.” Humphrey Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, was presumed to be the owner since his family’s badges appear in the borders. This attribution was changed when it was noticed that the prayers were written for a woman, naming “Anna” in the text.¹⁰⁰ Uncertainty often exists in determining the ownership of specific titles in which both husband and wife were known to have their individual (and occasionally shared) libraries.

Duchesses of Burgundy

According to Muriel Hughes, Margaret of Flanders, Duchess of Burgundy (1350-1405), was as responsible as her husband, Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (1342-1404), for “new developments in the trends in the making, gathering, and reading of books.”¹⁰¹ Margaret was considered to be “an able partner and responsible representative of her husband, for during his absence she ruled the realm.”¹⁰² Together, they continued the tradition of bibliophile Burgundy dukes and duchesses and built fine libraries. Because of their cultural pursuits, Burgundy was

⁹⁹ Meale, *Laywomen and Their Books*, 135.

¹⁰⁰ Meale, *Laywomen and Their Books*, 136.

¹⁰¹ Hughes, *The Library of Philip the Bold and Margaret of Flanders*, 145.

¹⁰² Hughes, *The Library of Philip the Bold and Margaret of Flanders*, 166.

described as the literary center of northern Europe during the fifteenth century.¹⁰³ The library of Margaret and Philip was indicative of their aristocratic interests, taste, and life in France and Burgundy during the latter half of the fourteenth century and the early years of the fifteenth. "It was a time when people were eager to acquire beautiful books on moral and religious subjects, books on history and philosophy, encyclopedias, romances, allegories, books on sports and travel."¹⁰⁴ Also included were translations of Greek and Roman classics and beautifully illustrated devotional books. Most of the books contained ownership marks of both Philip and Margaret, so it is uncertain as to which books were specifically hers. We can speculate that perhaps such division of ownership was not considered necessary or appropriate in their situation.

The Burgundian tradition of maintaining a fine library and acquiring new titles was continued in the later in the fifteenth century by Margaret of York (1446-1503), who became duchess of Burgundy in 1468 after marrying Charles the Bold (1433-77). Books made for Margaret of York were in keeping with those of her day, primarily moral and religious subjects, and are famous for their fine illuminations and script. In art, Margaret is almost always shown reading or praying.¹⁰⁵ Twenty-five books have been identified as hers, but the number is probably higher. Weightman has described Margaret of York as a true bibliophile because hers is one of the largest collections of this period traced to female ownership.¹⁰⁶ As with her ducal

¹⁰³ Christine Weightman, *Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy, 1446-1503* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 205.

¹⁰⁴ Hughes, *The Library of Philip the Bold and Margaret of Flanders*, 155.

¹⁰⁵ Weightman, 203.

¹⁰⁶ Weightman, 204.

predecessor, Margaret of Flanders, it is difficult to be specific about each woman's individual commissions and purchases since they had access to a magnificent ducal library that had reached over nine hundred volumes by the late-fifteenth century. Neither woman necessarily felt a great need to obtain many books of her own.¹⁰⁷

In being literate and financially able to collect books, the women of the Duchy of Burgundy were exceptional. Less privileged women had fewer options for literacy, yet they were often able to share in literary culture, as will be discussed in the next section.

¹⁰⁷ Muriel Hughes, "Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy: Diplomat, Patroness, Bibliophile, and Benefactress," *The Private Library* 7 (1984): 12-14. See also Thomas Kren and Roger S. Wieck, *The Visions of Tondal from the Library of Margaret of York* (Malibu, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1990).

PART V:

WOMEN'S LITERACY AND BOOKS FOR WOMENLiteracy in Girls

Women have long been encouraged to read by Christian moralists and social philosophers. The following passage was gleaned from a letter written in 403 A.D. by St. Jerome to a mother regarding the literary and moral upbringing of her newborn daughter:

Have a set of letters made for her of boxwood or of ivory and tell her their names. ... When she begins with uncertain hand to use the pen, either let another hand be put over hers or else have the letters marked on the tablet. ... Let her every day repeat to you a portion of the Scriptures as her fixed task. ... Instead of jewels or silk let her love the manuscripts of the Holy Scriptures.¹⁰⁸

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, other treatises were published which were in line with St. Jerome's suggestions and elaborated about how a mother should be in charge of the education of her daughters and of her sons' early education.¹⁰⁹ Queen Margaret, wife of King Louis IX of France, commissioned Vincent of Beauvais to write a treatise about the instruction that noble children should receive, and requested that the educating of girls be specifically addressed. The result was *De eruditione filiorum nobilium* (On the Education and Instruction of Noble Children), written c. 1247-49. In Italy, early in the next century, Francesco di Barberino included a section about how mothers should educate their daughters in

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Bell, 148.

¹⁰⁹ Bell, 148-149.

Reggimento e Costumi di Donna (Rules and Customs for Ladies). It is clear from these treatises that women had to be literate themselves in order to teach their children how to read and write, and that the girls may need to be literate for pragmatic political reasons. Barberino writes: “she should learn to read and write so that if it happens that she inherits lands she will be better able to rule them.”¹¹⁰

Literacy in Women

Scholars are divided about the levels of women’s literacy from past centuries. The extent of female literacy throughout Europe is difficult to determine for a few reasons. Literacy is not a simple concept, and can refer to a wide range of skills.¹¹¹ For example, literacy has been defined as the ability to both read and write; it has also been described as only the ability to read. There appears to have been a number of women who could read, but did not learn to write. These women, many of whom could have easily owned books, can be termed illiterate, depending on the definition. In this paper, the broader definition of literacy, centered on the ability to read, will be used. This paper is examining book ownership among women; thus, the emphasis is on reading, not writing.

The range of social practices around reading further complicates our understanding of literacy. Women could have had their books read to them individually, or they could have participated in the communal manner of reading that was popular during the Middle Ages. Yet if a woman was read to, does that necessarily mean she could not read herself? A complete answer to this question

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Bell, 149.

¹¹¹ Bawcutt, 33-34.

requires deeper research into the actions of individuals, and thus beyond the scope of this paper.

During the early to middle medieval era, the few noblewomen who learned to read did so in Latin. Beginning in the second half of the twelfth century, more women began to learn to read in the vernacular.¹¹² The number of women who could read increased through the Middle Ages, with a significant rise in the early modern period. Literacy in the vernacular increased after the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and women's lack of tutoring in Latin became less significant. "Reading in the vernacular in the sixteenth century was widely disseminated among the humblest social ranks, irrespective of sex" according to J.W. Wright.

Historians have provided us with indications about literacy, both in general and individual instances. John B. Friedman's study of book owners in northern England supports Bell's thesis that women were actively involved in the promotion of literacy and reading among other women. He found that men often bequeathed books to women, suggesting that many (although probably not all) of these women were active readers.¹¹³ According to Wright, there is sufficient evidence that many of the "great ladies of the English Renaissance were frequently learned," and the intellectual accomplishments of Lady Jane Grey and Queen Elizabeth have been well documented.¹¹⁴ His aim is to try to determine the reading and intellectual

¹¹² Mate, 70-72.

¹¹³ John B. Friedman, *Northern English Books, Owners, and Makers in the Late Middle Ages* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 20.

¹¹⁴ Louis B. Wright, "The Reading of Renaissance English Women," *Studies in Philology* 28, no. 4 (October 1931): 139.

accomplishments of the average woman. He concludes that the levels of literacy among Renaissance persons, both men and women, have been underestimated.¹¹⁵

Josephine Koster Tavers has attempted to sort out the varying theories of women's literary culture in medieval Europe. As she puts it, depending on what source one reads, one will discover that "women were either totally ignorant; or barely able to read and write; or able to compose works of rhetorical sophistications but unable to write them down; or able to compose, write out, copy, and perhaps supervise the distribution of their works."¹¹⁶ Tavers refutes the first assumption, which she calls phallogocentric, claiming that the tag of ignorance was applied simply because most women were not schooled in the scholarly language of Latin. Many other scholars have claimed the existence of a community of highly active and engaged women readers as well, and Tavers offers her own example as proof that there were indeed women who could "manage" Latin. Tavers cites Alynore (or Alinor) Hull, who translated texts from French and Latin into English. Hull's will revealed that she was a prominent collector of books, who took care to bequeath them to friends and family when she died in 1460. Tavers notes that at least one scholar believes that Hull's translations were for a mixed-gender audience fluent in French, Latin, and English.¹¹⁷ Tavers also cites a colophon to a Benedictine text of 1415 (written by a woman) that entreats women readers to treat their books well. Apparently, many women readers would regularly write in and correct their books, even cutting pages out of them.

¹¹⁵ Wright, 140. See also J.W. Adamson, "The Extent of Literacy in England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: Notes and Conjectures," *The Library*, New Series X (1929): 163-193

¹¹⁶ Tavers, 305.

¹¹⁷ Tavers, 309-310.

Although it seems odd in our modern times, women who owned books received criticism from both sexes. Seventeenth and eighteenth century writers satirized and condemned women's libraries, suggesting that women who owned books were ridiculous. Grundy writes about comments made by the Right Honorable Joseph Addison who wrote about a book collector named Leonora. He claimed that her books were arranged to suit the décor, not the subject matter, an anecdote that likely only served to reinforce myths of female superficiality and ignorance. According to Addison, women had an appetite for forbidden knowledge. For example, he asserted that women concealed works of amorous fiction. Women are too susceptible and impressionistic, he implied, to read such books. In addition to male detractors, women book owners were also criticized by others of their own sex. These critics suggested that women who embarked on a course of learning would emerge thinking they were above their unlearned female friends and would lose interest in common things.¹¹⁸

Lollard Women

When studying the spread of readership and book collecting among women, it is important to note that while literacy did exist, it was relatively rare in some cultures and regions in medieval Europe. Shannon McSheffrey's study of literacy and gender in the late medieval Lollard communities in Britain emphasizes two points: first, that literacy was quite rare among the general population; and second, that women's literacy was even rarer than that of men. She cites one (perhaps overly) pessimistic

¹¹⁸ Grundy, 4.

claim that 99% of women and 90% of men were illiterate.¹¹⁹ Overall, McSheffrey's article counters the assumption that women shared equally in textual and literary advances.

Lollards were a heretical sect whose members expressly came together around texts and their interpretation. McSheffrey argues that evidence for complete literacy is surprisingly rare in Lollard men and is even rarer for Lollard women.¹²⁰ In fact, she cites the example of a Lollard book collector, who claimed that she could not read and had to ask her local parson to read her books aloud. However, despite the documentary evidence that McSheffrey cites, it is important to keep in mind that members of the Lollard community were persecuted for their beliefs and possibly misrepresented their levels of literacy to the authorities.

However, there are several issues that point to wider literary activities among women than the archival record indicates. For one, illiteracy did not always prevent access to texts, for books could be read aloud or otherwise summarized orally.¹²¹ McSheffrey points out that reading was thus a co-operative and community-oriented activity. This evidence may indicate that many women collected books and "read" them in groups, even if, individually, most were illiterate. Indeed, McSheffrey cites several such cases in her article.¹²² Also, McSheffrey also emphasizes that books were passed from person to person in the Lollard community. Thus, the records of inheritance and ownership that are preserved in wills and estates might easily be

¹¹⁹ Shannon McSheffrey, "Literacy and the Gender Gap in the Late Middle Ages: Reading and Women in Lollard Communities," in *Women, the Book, and the Godly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference, 1993*, eds. Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 166.

¹²⁰ McSheffrey, 159.

¹²¹ McSheffrey, 158.

¹²² McSheffrey, 162-63.

misleading. Very often, books were passed to friends before they could be officially recorded as part of an estate. Further, women's collections of books were sometimes recorded as belonging to husbands. However, in practical, daily life, the lines of ownership may not have been so clear.¹²³ Additionally, while economic business often required rudimentary literacy of men, the same claim can also be made for many privileged women, whose household duties included a great deal of similar economic activity. Finally, the Lollard communities also provide evidence that women taught each other to read in small groups, and thus affected greatly affected the literacy rate among privileged women. McSheffrey cites the examples of Alice Rowley and Alice Cottismore, well-off women in Coventry, who were each taught to read by Lollard women.¹²⁴ McSheffrey concludes that women's access to books and readership may not have been as limited by the rarity of literacy as one might presume.

Ralph Hanna has also studied the Lollard community, and his assessments about women's power and patronage in the fifteenth century are rather disquieting. He suggests that women "may, at best, achieve power only at second hand and only at the expense of other groups more marginalized than they themselves. Moreover, such power may be achieved only fitfully."¹²⁵ Hanna points out that the socially powerful women who tended to be literary patrons acquired their power through the fortunes or positions of their husbands or fathers, and usually not through their own efforts. Hanna's case studies are of influential literary women in early fifteenth

¹²³ McSheffrey, 163-64.

¹²⁴ McSheffrey, 167-68.

¹²⁵ Ralph Hanna, "Some Norfolk Women and Their Books, ca. 1390-1440," in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 288.

century Norfolk, England. These women were active in religious debates and their publishing and patronage stemmed from their efforts to spread their heretical Lollard faith. Hanna's findings are double-edged: he does not deny women's social power, he only points out that it was achieved with difficulty and often not maintained for very long. Like McSheffrey, Hanna highlights the rarity of literate women in Lollard communities, and the fact that they would have literate people read aloud to them.¹²⁶ However, Lollard women were not merely passive or oppressed. They were intellectually active and exercised their agency—merely within limits.

Determining Readership

Were books read *by* the women who owned them, or were they read *to* them? Determining the actual readership of texts is more complicated than ascribing ownership. This is primarily because such a determination depends largely on secondary evidence, such as anecdotal writings about evidence of women reading or using their books for study. Sometimes we do have proof of use, in the form of marginal notes and annotations in a catalog. Distinguishing between ownership and readership is difficult, since information about individual readers is not always easy to find. Such information that does survive is often scattered and fragmented throughout various academic disciplines. The current expansion in studies of manuscript ownership and transmission, including bequests of manuscripts in wills, has made such information more accessible, and one consequence is that we now know that the female readership of many texts was much wider than has traditionally been recognized.

¹²⁶ Hanna, 291.

Books for Women

The vast majority of texts owned by women were written or compiled by men.¹²⁷ They were created to serve specific purposes, such as devotional needs, to teach children (especially female offspring) literary and moral values, to provide prescriptive roles of conduct, and to manage various aspects of households.¹²⁸

Some books read by women were books written especially for women. Women who commissioned books often made choices regarding the text that served to create a finished product that was more directly suited to a female audience. For instance, in commissioning books of hours, the patron had the choice of which prayers and saints were to be included; as well, all of the prayers would be written with feminine pronouns. Friedman cites several examples of prayer books and missals, written for feminine tastes.¹²⁹ Analyses of individual women's libraries have revealed books intended for either gender, as well as books that were intended for women readers, as is obvious from their dedications and context.

From the twelfth century, the demand for vernacular devotional texts increased dramatically, as lay piety flourished and a growing middle class provided an audience that was literate (or semi-literate) but untutored in Latin. Authors of

¹²⁷ Although there were women writers during the medieval and early modern periods, the overwhelming majority of texts read by women were written by men. For an informative view of these gender implications in religious texts that were circulated widely in England between 1350 and 1530, see Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers and Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹²⁸ For an in-depth look at the prayer books, practical guides, and popular romances that were printed for English women in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, see Suzanne Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English books for Women, 1475-1640* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1982). In addition to listing books specifically directed to women, Hull provides historical contextualization and discussion about the various types of books that were published with women in mind.

¹²⁹ Friedman, *Northern English Books, Owners, and Makers*, 12.

devotional works often made sharp distinctions between male and female audiences, clearly indicating that the gender of their intended readers affected both the style and content of their works.¹³⁰ Included in religious works were prayer services, lives of the saints, moral treatises, didactic works, and treatises of mystics. These could include books of philosophical and theological speculation that were read by both genders, such as Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Of all the books of devotion, the most common were books of hours.

Books of hours could be intellectually didactic, spiritually moving, as well as amusing and entertaining. A book of hours was composed of prayers to be read at certain hours of the day and included varied collections of biblical excerpts and hagiography. They were personalized to suit a specific reader, and have been described as providing devotional exercises that enable piety but without direct church control.¹³¹ Books of hours were the most popular devotional item developed in the twelfth century. They were not exclusively for women, but virtually every woman of the upper middle class and nobility had one.¹³²

The second most prevalent genre of books owned by women during the Middle Ages was the romance, many of which were written in French.¹³³ There were a number of French medieval texts that were written explicitly for women readers.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Catherine Innes-Parker, "The Legacy of *Ancrene Wisse*: Translations, Adaptations, Influences and Audience, with Special Attention to Women Readers," paper presented at 36th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan (May 3-6, 2001), 40.

¹³¹ Bell, 146.

¹³² For more information about books of hours, see J.P. Harthan, *Books of Hours and Their Owners* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

¹³³ According to Weightman, in the fifteenth century, very few books of any genre in the libraries of the aristocrats were in English since "most of the books written for the nobility, even in England, were in French." See Weightman, 205.

¹³⁴ Tavers, 311-312.

In England, Arthurian themes were especially popular, while Chaucer was less favored.¹³⁵ Poetry and literary anthologies could also be found in women's libraries, as could biographies of virtuous and noble women.¹³⁶

Household management tomes were also written specifically for women. Books on "housewifery" included more than cleaning and household management. They also included information to help women with medical diagnoses and treatments. Recipes and prescriptions would co-exist in the same volume. Midwifery was another topic that was included either as a part of the household books, or in a separate volume.

In the sixteenth century, there are allusions in literature of women from the lower and middle classes who owned romances and other works of fiction, especially courtly fiction pertaining to what defines good conduct. Romances became popular with the lower classes, while maintaining favor with the upper classes as well.¹³⁷ Wright contends "the feminine audience had reached such proportions by the last quarter of the sixteenth century that many authors were making a definite and frank appeal to women."¹³⁸ Writers ingratiated themselves to women, often writing flowery dedications.

Sometimes the type of literature collected by women played a role in the promotion of the genre. During the seventeenth century, Frances Egerton, Countess of Bridgewater, was among a small group of women book collectors, such as Lady Mohun and Frances Wolfreton, who were "avant-garde" in their respect for, and

¹³⁵ Meale, *Laywomen and Their Books*, 139-142.

¹³⁶ Wright, 150.

¹³⁷ Wright, 154.

¹³⁸ Wright, 152.

collecting of, plays.¹³⁹ Consistent with the evidence provided by other scholars, Egerton was more than a reader and collector; she performed in several of Johnson's masques at court, and cultivated acting as a hobby in her children. This suggests that as women began to share in the spread of literacy, they were able to contribute to a shift in literary culture, promoting the literary value of plays. Hackel thus supports the contentions of other scholars, such as Bell, who contend that women's book collecting contributed far more to the development of modern culture than has traditionally been acknowledged.

It is important to note that when today's scholars compile a list of a woman's library, such as in the examples and case studies in this paper, there are titles from across many genres and academic disciplines, indicating that the reading interests of women were more eclectic than narrow.

Indications of the types of books that women owned can be determined by studying the circumstances of a particular title in terms of its commission and the audience it later reached. Catherine Innes-Parker has been conducting research about *Ancrene Wisse*, a book of devotional advice, written for three sisters by a chaplain, about 1230. It is admired as a work of great charm and expressiveness and regarded as the greatest prose work of the Early Middle English period. It is noteworthy to mention that it was originally written in English, although Latin manuscripts were made afterwards. In her in-depth study of the seventeen extant manuscripts and their audiences, Innes-Parker concludes that *Ancrene Wisse* enjoyed a wide readership, including both men and women, both lay and religious. It circulated in a variety of forms, and was owned by royalty, nobility, and the middle

¹³⁹ Hackel, "Rowme" of Its Own, 126-127.

class. It passed from religious houses to lay owners and back again, and was translated for the use of readers of widely varied levels of education and differing cultural milieus. It was also read across a wide geographical area, crossing England by the end of the thirteenth century and eventually making its way to mainland Europe.¹⁴⁰ It spawned many similarly themed works, which also held wide appeal. Innes-Parker cautions that the gaps between intended and actual audiences suggest that we cannot draw wholesale conclusions from addresses such as “dear sister” which suggest a gendered approach. She reminds us that men and women frequently read texts originally directed at the opposite sex. Yet, there is substantial evidence that these texts, originally composed for a specifically female audience, were widely read and owned by women, who passed them on to other women. Such patterns of ownership and transmission suggest that their authors had a keen sense of what would appeal to their intended readers.¹⁴¹

Like Innes-Parker, Rhiannon Purdie determines the gender of book ownership by the subject matter of the books. In her study, she outlines the writings collected within a particular manuscript during the late Middle Ages. This manuscript is comprised of fourteen items, including saints’ lives, romances and “courtesy” texts, educational texts and courtly material. Female saints were perceived to be the favored role model for female readers, and many books about female saints were commissioned for or dedicated to women. It merits mention that male saints are not included in this collection, strongly suggesting that a woman commissioned the work. Another factor pointing to female ownership are some of the poetic lyrics, which are

¹⁴⁰ Innes-Parker, 17.

¹⁴¹ Innes-Parker, 39-40.

in line with prescriptive narratives of the day, exhorting women to live a good and moral life. Further support for this conclusion includes the female narrator, writings about women's experience of marriage, an emphasis on heroines, and the fact that the educational text relates to women's role in early childhood education. To this list, Purdie notes that the name "elysabet" is written at the bottom of one page.¹⁴²

Salons

Women's literacy and involvement in literature changed gradually to permit varied and socially prominent roles. Erica Harth surveys the roles women played in French literary culture between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. She focuses on the prominent role that the literary "Salons" run by women played in cultural life. In the sixteenth century, before the establishment of the Salons, women's literacy and activities as collectors and writers tended to be secretive, and the semi-public and semi-private contexts of the Salons provided women with many more opportunities.

As Harth describes, the Salons were organized conversations controlled by a woman, the *salonnière*, who acted as hostess for intellectual guests.¹⁴³ The topics of conversation would slowly expand to include philosophy, natural science, literature, poetry, novels, current affairs, and politics. Naturally, the Salons encouraged both literacy and book collecting among women. Texts and manuscripts were often traded

¹⁴² Rhiannon Purdie, "Sexing the Manuscript," *Neophilologus* 82 no. 1 (January 1998): 139-48.

¹⁴³ Erica Harth, "The Salon Woman Goes Public ... or Does She?" in *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France*, eds. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 184.

among participants and passed through many hands, resulting in an often ambiguous and transitory type of book ownership.

Women's roles in the Salon were not limited to that of *salonnière*. Harth argues that women's involvement in the Salons was amorphous and took many forms, not all of which are now distinguishable from each other. For instance, Harth points out that Salon conversation "often glided imperceptibly into literary production."¹⁴⁴ A woman who acted as a hostess often had a considerable hand in the writing of a text, or in its publication. Also, the high regard given to spoken conversation in the Salon allowed a *salonnière* to act as "publishers" of ideas and preliminary texts, to some degree. As well, texts produced in Salons may have been result of a much more collaborative writing process than previously thought.¹⁴⁵

Women in the Salons had large impacts on French culture. For instance, Harth cites Joan de Jean's arguments that Salon literary culture was largely responsible for the origin of the novel in France.¹⁴⁶ Also, the philosophical, scientific, literary, and artistic discussions aided in the establishment and spread of what most modern scholars would call modern French culture.¹⁴⁷

Other case studies of women collectors and their social roles reveal much about both the history of women and the history of their impacts on culture. Four such studies follow in the next section.

¹⁴⁴ Harth, 185.

¹⁴⁵ Harth, 184.

¹⁴⁶ Harth, 184.

¹⁴⁷ Harth, 181.

PART VI:
CASE STUDIES

Jeanne de Laval (1433-1498)

Jeanne de Laval was an avid bibliophile who received dedications in many books. She married René d'Anjou in 1454 and became Duchess of Anjou and Bar and Countess of Provence. Little is known of her life, due to highly incomplete records.¹⁴⁸ She was a close friend of Anne de Bretagne, herself an active book collector. Jeanne's husband was a great patron of the arts, especially of literature and book production. His library is one of the largest belonging to a French prince in the fifteenth century.¹⁴⁹

Jeanne's will confirms that she also owned a large collection of books, although one much smaller than her husband's vast library. Several heraldic devices such as *imprese* attest to her ownership of surviving volumes. As a collector, Jeanne took effort to distinguish her books from those of her husband. The new coat of arms that she adopted after her husband's death in 1480 indicates that she desired her collection to be kept separate from her husband's.¹⁵⁰ Like many other women book collectors, she left some of her treasured volumes to her daughters.

¹⁴⁸ Anne-Marie Legaré, "Reassessing Women's Libraries in Late Medieval France: The Case of Jeanne de Laval," *Renaissance Studies* 10, no. 2 (1996): 210.

¹⁴⁹ Legaré, 211.

¹⁵⁰ Legaré, 212.

Anne-Marie Legaré argues that several manuscripts in Jeanne's collection reflect her personality. For instance, Legaré suggests that Jeanne was responsive to her husband's literary tastes and commissioned a copy of *Le mortifiement de vaine plaisance*, a book that René wrote. A number of the books that she owned were encomia to her family and lineage. One important volume is a version of Matteo Palmieri's *De temporibus*, translated into French expressly for Jeanne. This text is a history of the world originally written for no less an esteemed figure than Piero di Cosimo de' Medici. In the introduction to Jeanne's copy, the translator, Giovanni Cossa, informs the reader that even though Jeanne was fluent in Latin, he chose to translate the text into French because the vernacular was more widespread.¹⁵¹

There is one active commission that can be attributed to Jeanne with certainty. In 1465, she asked for the *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* by Guillaume of Digulleville to be converted into prose. This text was apparently quite popular among aristocratic women; René's sister, Marie d'Anjou owned a copy.¹⁵²

The limited surviving records of Jeanne's household add considerably to modern knowledge of her collecting practice. For the years 1455-1459, records show that Jeanne relied upon a number of local scribes and illuminators to furnish her with sumptuous manuscripts and to enrich her library. She used her own funds to acquire books. Unfortunately, few of the volumes described in the records are extant today. For instance, Jeanne ordered a copy of *Le miroir des dames*, a moral treatise popular among women of her class. At least one illuminator, Adenet Lescuyer, described

¹⁵¹ Legaré, 215.

¹⁵² Legaré, 217.

himself as belonging to Jeanne's court. Jeanne also commissioned books as gifts to female family members such as her sister, Louise.¹⁵³

For the years 1479-1480, the surviving records show that Jeanne was a far more active collector of books than has previously been thought. Recent research has re-attributed at least thirteen book purchases to Jeanne, instead of to her husband.¹⁵⁴ Among the books she purchased were hagiographic texts on St. Honorat, relating to her and her husband's patronage of a local monastery. Legaré suggests that their interest in the cult of St. Honorat relates both to René's illness and eventual death and to Jeanne's efforts to promote René's family and position. The legends of St. Honorat were taken as evidence that René's family was related to the ancient rulers of Hungary as well as Anjou.¹⁵⁵

Frances Stanley Egerton, Countess of Bridgewater (1585-1636)

Frances Egerton, Countess of Bridgewater, was an enthusiastic collector of books. Egerton's household records indicate that she owned 241 books as of 1633.¹⁵⁶ While this was a substantial library, it was likely not uncommon for a member of her class with artistic and literary connections. What is unusual is that a comprehensive and concise catalog of her holdings has survived.¹⁵⁷ That such a catalog was created at all suggests that the collection was very important to Egerton; comprehensive catalogs of private collections are rare. It may have been intended as

¹⁵³ Legaré, 217.

¹⁵⁴ Legaré, 220.

¹⁵⁵ Legaré, 221-222.

¹⁵⁶ Hackel, 'Rowme' of Its Own, 125.

¹⁵⁷ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 4.

“a gesture to announce her relation to the world of books and her position as a book owner.”¹⁵⁸ Unfortunately, the records of her education and other intellectual pursuits are no longer extant. But judging by the books in her collection, she was fluent in French and was interested in history, theology, epistolary style, French music, foreign travel, and English drama.

Unlike with other women collectors, evidence of Egerton’s collecting practice has survived. Hackel writes: “The countess’s library does not seem to have been made up of gifts, and it was not an inherited library.”¹⁵⁹ This contention is based on succinctly written notes in two books that identify them as gifts; such careful and deliberate inscriptions suggest that these books stood apart from the others.¹⁶⁰ The Countess and her husband had individual ownership marks and sometimes each owned a copy of the same book.¹⁶¹ This evidence supports the contention that the books were purchased and owned by the Countess.

Egerton’s was not largely an inherited collection since all but ten of the books were printed after the death of her father, Lord Stanley. Inheritance is even more unlikely as a source for the collection considering that her mother was alive when Lord Stanley died, and his library would have passed to Lady Stanley.

Frances Egerton’s books were arranged idiosyncratically by size, “considered to be the most efficient way to store books,” and were further organized by subject and author within.¹⁶² The publication dates of the volumes point to a steady pattern of

¹⁵⁸ Hackel, *Countess of Bridgewater*, 12.

¹⁵⁹ Hackel, *Countess of Bridgewater*, 6.

¹⁶⁰ Hackel, *Countess of Bridgewater*, 6.

¹⁶¹ Hackel, *Countess of Bridgewater*, 7.

¹⁶² Hackel, *Countess of Bridgewater*, 7.

acquisition throughout her adulthood. Half of the books were devotional or religious, not unusual for a woman of her class. Egerton also owned treatises, sermons, and doctrinal books. Further, “many of these books represented opposing religious and political positions.”¹⁶³ Egerton appears to have been intellectually engaged with political and religious debates. Literature and history formed the next largest type of texts, then plays, followed by recreational literature. Egerton collected widely: a broad spectrum of works, classical to current, was acquired from both England and Continental Europe. The Countess owned translations from Latin and Greek, but nothing in those original languages. This is to be expected since her education would have omitted the formal Latin of her male contemporaries.¹⁶⁴ She may also have had a library in the country, where other “books for women” could have been housed. Two facts also point to the possibility of another library: the existence of a book with her stamp that is not in the catalog, and the curious omission of medical books. She would not have needed medical books in London, where pharmacists and doctors were readily available, but she might have needed this information in the country.¹⁶⁵

As many women collectors did, she bequeathed some of her books to her daughters and daughter-in-law, as well as to her son.¹⁶⁶

Frances Wolfreston (1607-1677)

Little biographical information is known about Frances Wolfreston (born in Middlemore), a member of the rural gentry of Birmingham. She was the eldest of

¹⁶³ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 8.

¹⁶⁴ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 10.

¹⁶⁶ Hackel, Countess of Bridgewater, 13.

twenty-two children and wife of Francis Wolfreston, owner of a manor house in Staffordshire. Her husband died in 1666, leaving her a widow for several years. Wolfreston's epitaph suggests that she was a strong and provident wife.

These slim biographical details reveal little about a woman who appears to have been a significant collector of books. Wolfreston's collection is all the more noteworthy because she was not a member of the aristocracy, a class far more likely to have literary interests. Like other gentry or minor titled figures such as Frances Edgerton and Lady Mohun, Wolfreston's main interest was in bound dramas and playscripts.¹⁶⁷ Nearly one hundred of Wolfreston's books have been identified, due to the inscription that she carefully wrote in each: "Frances Wolfreston / Hor Bouk [her book]." Paul Morgan speculates that Wolfreston noted her ownership in her books to aid in keeping her collection together after her sons inherited it. Her will specifically instructed that her collection be kept whole, and it remained so for 179 years, at Statfold Hall, where her descendents lived.¹⁶⁸

Although plays and other types of books that Wolfreston collected were disparaged in her day, many items in her collection are now considered to be great works of literature or significant rarities—such as Donne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Aesop. The bulk of her collection consisted of literature (about half); one-quarter were religious texts; about one-tenth were historical books. A number of other miscellaneous genres such as medicine and foreign literature rounded out her collection.¹⁶⁹ Wolfreston may well have made many of her purchases in London, as

¹⁶⁷ Hackel, "Rowme" of Its Own, 126-127.

¹⁶⁸ Paul Morgan, "Frances Wolfreston and 'hor bouks': A Seventeenth-Century Woman Book-Collector," *The Library*, 6th series, 11, no. 3 (1989): 201.

¹⁶⁹ Morgan, 204.

the booksellers in Staffordshire did not always carry material of the type or quality that she is known to have owned.¹⁷⁰ Wolfreton also wrote texts of her own. Four texts in her hand are now in the British Library. These consist mainly of verse and have strong religious overtones.¹⁷¹

Morgan defers the question of how typical Wolfreton was in her tastes and collecting practices. However, Hackel suggests that Wolfreton was unusual both in her taste for printed drama and in the care with which she organized and maintained her collection. As Hackel points out, Wolfreton's attention to her collection suggests "a book owner who was both deliberate and knowledgeable."¹⁷²

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)

It is not surprising that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu accumulated a substantial private library since she had a lifelong passion for reading, books, and libraries. As a child, Lady Montagu spent five or six hours each day in her father's library. In surviving texts, she writes that she was "stealing Latin ... whilst everybody else thought that I was reading nothing but novels and romances."¹⁷³ Her father's library included books about famous women, such as St. Theresa, Queen Elizabeth I, and Queen Christina of Sweden, as well as books by women authors, for instance Sappho and Margaret Cavendish.¹⁷⁴ Some of these women, such as Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Christina, were also book collectors, and may have been role models for the

¹⁷⁰ Morgan, 209.

¹⁷¹ Morgan, 205.

¹⁷² Hackel, "Rowme" of Its Own, 126.

¹⁷³ Grundy, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Grundy, 2.

young Mary. In addition, Mary's father had books discussing the status of women—both pro- and anti-feminist. She was very interested in fiction, and mildly interested in religious texts. Grundy describes Lady Montagu's life as one that was “spent inside, not outside, English social, political, and literary culture.”¹⁷⁵

Compared to most women's collections, we have a great deal of information about Lady Montagu and her books. She was the all time leading female writer who wrote about the “great period of English literature” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1739, when she was fifty years old, a list of her books was compiled when they were to be transported from England to mainland Europe. This list consisted of approximately 662 books. However, many items that were generically cataloged, such as “pamphlets” (a single poem) and “volumes of manuscripts.”¹⁷⁶ She had more books at age fifty than did Samuel Johnson at his death, aged seventy-five. This is quite an impressive achievement, especially for an eighteenth-century woman.¹⁷⁷ Montagu continued to collect books while living abroad, and it is estimated that she had a total of 750 books in total at the time of her death in 1762.

In addition to books in English and French, Montagu owned at least twenty-nine in Latin, twelve in Italian, and one in Old High German. She collected works of both ancient and modern writers. She also owned several translations of works written originally in Arabic, Greek, Persian, Spanish, and Turkish.¹⁷⁸ This multicultural taste suggests a tendency towards “the European tradition of

¹⁷⁵ Grundy, 9.

¹⁷⁶ Grundy, 5.

¹⁷⁷ Grundy, 6.

¹⁷⁸ Grundy, 9.

international Renaissance and Enlightenment learning.”¹⁷⁹ Her tastes ran the gamut from the academic to the avant-garde, and from popular escapist fiction to the abstruse. She read philosophy, theology, and books in foreign languages. Most of her books on household matters tended towards the innovative and intellectual rather than the traditional. For example, Lady Montagu owned the full order of medical books by Dr. Thomas Sydenham rather than “books for women” dealing with traditional medical treatments. She owned *Cuisinier François* instead of the common English recipes. She accumulated steadily throughout the years: “If we assume that she bought *mostly* new publications, then the dates of her eighteenth-century volumes suggest that book buying was a constant in her life.”¹⁸⁰ Marks of use in the books themselves in the form of notations and marked passages reveal that her books were read by her, not to her, not they were not simply purchased for show. Her learning is reflected in annotations that reveal her knowledge of politics, philosophy, and literature.¹⁸¹

Discrepancies are common when examining medieval and early modern private libraries, and Lady Mary’s was no exception. A significant number of the 662 titles recorded in 1739 were absent from the catalog of her library made by Sotheby’s in 1928, where only 182 titles were recorded.¹⁸² Items may have been lost during her moves around the continent, during their examination by the Inquisition, or when she was swindled by an Italian count. Also, after her death, her descendants may have sold off her books gradually. Lady Montagu was both a

¹⁷⁹ Grundy, 14.

¹⁸⁰ Grundy, 12.

¹⁸¹ Grundy, 16.

¹⁸² Grundy, 6.

borrower and a lender, the latter being another possible reason for the dissolution of her library.¹⁸³

Some uncertainty remains as to how Lady Montagu accumulated all of her books and how often her collection was supplemented. She may have acquired some books through inheritance from her paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Evelyn Pierrepont, who in turn inherited from her own mother. Despite the vast size of her collection and her longtime interest in the library, there is no indication that Lady Montagu inherited books from her father's estate.¹⁸⁴ The cost of each text (if purchased) remains unknown, as do full accounts of bequests and gifts. She very likely received some volumes as presents from friends such as Voltaire and Montesquieu.¹⁸⁵

These case studies illustrate general ideas raised in this paper. Conclusions can be drawn from them and other findings from the scholarly literature examined so far, as will be discussed in the next section.

¹⁸³ Grundy, 7.

¹⁸⁴ Grundy, 8-9.

¹⁸⁵ Grundy, 11.

PART VII:

CONCLUDING REMARKSPresenting an Image

Concluding remarks are usually based on what the writer has found, but this conclusion is based on what was expected but not found. I had expected to find evidence that certain book collectors acquired their libraries in a calculated manner in order to convey a particular image. Of the many sources examined, only one alluded to this type of self-promotion, Carol Meale's study of fifteenth-century patrons, buyers and owners of books in terms of book production and social status.

In her article, Meale suggests that aristocratic women commissioned sumptuous books as part of a "public relations" program. That is, evidence exists that certain women in England and France attempted to raise the fortunes of their families through careful propaganda. Book production was one means used for this end. She also suggests these public relations programs were carried out by approximately ten times as many men than women.¹⁸⁶ More evidence of this among women book collectors was expected since there were a number of European men and women during the medieval and early modern eras (and many afterwards as well) who commissioned works of art that were intended to present a constructed public persona or convey their denied or actual status. For example, these patrons

¹⁸⁶ Meale, Patrons, Buyers, and Owners, 213.

commissioned works of art that proclaimed such qualities as piety, munificence, status, virtue, or learnedness, to declare to the viewer that the patron possessed the qualities in question.

Evidence of “image management” can be found, however, in much of the art historical literature, such as the case of Isabella d’Este, Duchess of Mantua (1474-1539). She was an Italian noblewoman who was educated in the humanist tradition and raised in a highly intellectual atmosphere. As an adult, she formed her own library, which included important works of literature, philosophy, history, and religion. She commissioned texts and searched for rare books. She ordered books to be printed using her own specifications for parchment and bindings. Isabella had an agenda to present herself as an ideal wife and learned woman. She commissioned paintings for her private *studiolo* that put forth this precise image. She also bought collectibles and antiquities that were carefully displayed in her *grotto*. Other than noting the particulars of some of her special book orders, almost nothing has been written about her library, which is estimated to have consisted of approximately 140 carefully chosen works. It is highly likely that Isabella had the same public relations program in mind for her library as for her art and antiquities collections.¹⁸⁷

Isabella’s library and her efforts at image management through her library remain unstudied, as does the self-promotion agenda behind other women’s libraries. But it will likely not be long before research is carried out further on this fascinating aspect of book ownership.

¹⁸⁷ See Clifford M. Brown, “A Ferrarese Lady and a Mantuan Marchesa,” in *Women and Art in Early Modern Europe: Patrons, Collectors, and Connoisseurs*, ed. Cynthia Lawrence (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1997) 53-71, and Egon Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este at Mantua* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

Dispelling the Myth

In her 1972 study of Venetian book owners from 1345 to 1480, Susan Connel expected to find evidence for only men's book ownership. She writes: "greatly exceptional, not for the contents but for being found at all, are records of books owned by women."¹⁸⁸ She continues, mentioning three specific women and examples of their books. She does not address if these were the only women for whom she found evidence of book ownership, nor does she discuss women's book ownership any more extensively than the passage cited above. Connel's text represents a formerly widely held belief that very few women collected books or developed their own libraries. Heidi Brayman Hackel's work represents the more current scholarship from the past quarter century by those who believe otherwise. She and others have found evidence that many aristocratic women developed collections of books throughout the Middle Ages, and that middle class women were able to do so on an increasing basis as books gradually became less expensive through the early modern period.

Hackel's research into the collection owned by Countess of Bridgewater has led her to conclude that women's libraries were much more common than we have been led to believe. The Countess of Bridgewater has been celebrated in that "womanly way" of praising her as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother; she appears to be unexceptional in regard to learning, intellectual pursuits, and intelligence. Indeed, she seems entirely unremarkable for a woman of her time and social status. And yet,

¹⁸⁸ Susan Connel, "Books and Their Owners in Venice: 1345-1480," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 35 (1972): 163.

as Hackel writes: “It is her very conventionality, I would argue, that makes her library collection so striking, for its existence does not seem to have been considered worthy of remark. And if a woman’s library of 241 volumes did not warrant attention in 1633, then we must expand our notions of early modern women as consumers of books.”¹⁸⁹ Hackel’s assessment promises to re-orient and expand the history of women’s libraries in important ways.

Hackel’s contentions are supported by those of Innes-Parker: “When examining the kinds of texts that we know women read, and studying patterns of ownership, we can conclude that, contrary to received opinion, women were not relegated to the marginal wastelands in their devotional reading, but were, on the contrary, on the cutting edge of things.”¹⁹⁰ New developments in vernacular devotional writings rapidly found their way into the hands of women who, it is increasingly evident, were intelligent and sophisticated readers. This is not in keeping with the image many people have of medieval and early modern women: obedient and submissive beings who invariably could not or chose not to read. Nor were women’s reading habits and reading materials substantially different from those of many men, particularly laymen. Today’s scholars are deconstructing and analyzing “women’s books” and are finding that women were reading a larger variety of genres, often at a more complex level, than had been expected.

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It is fitting to close with words from Susan Groag Bell, who believes women had a special intellectual, emotional, and spiritual relationship with books: “Because

¹⁸⁹ Hackel, *Countess of Bridgewater*, 14.

¹⁹⁰ Innes-Parker, 29.

of their inferior status in medieval Christian thought and their exclusion from scholarship and clerical life, women had an even greater need for the mental and spiritual nourishment offered by books than men did.”¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ Bell, 136.

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