

***Communities on the Move: The Transformation of Communities of Women Religious in Late Medieval and Early Modern England***

By

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***Abstract***

English women religious were part of consistently changing, reforming and vibrant communities. The convent that enclosed them with walls was only one of the ways in which their communities were defined, and of which they were a part. In late medieval England, their communities were informed and consistently reasserted through the exchange, integration and reading of pious texts that informed the spirituality of the convent, demonstrated their connections with the local laity and placed the female readership in a wider community of shared devotion. Visual culture within the convent, and engaged with by the inhabitants, vividly reflected broad trends of a wide devotional community, and the gifting of secular material placed these women firmly within wider lay communities. During the Dissolution of the monasteries, communities of women religious were not diminished by the threat to and eventual disbanding of institutional boundaries; both members of the internal and external communities negotiated community borders to maintain communal connections. After the Suppression, communities of female religious were once again maintained and recreated through texts and through their sense of spiritual self, often in hostile and alien environments. Through three case studies, the communal experiences of women religious in England are assessed, bringing together convents of different size, wealth and religious order to understand a representative, national picture of female religious life. Borrowing methods from prosopography, this work analyses the transformations of community from both external influence and internal negotiation, reformation and recreation. The communities to which women religious belonged were not static, but consistently reaffirmed and reformed through textual evidence, visual culture and negotiation with the laity.

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***Introduction***

*The Life and Good End of Sister Marie*, written in the last decades of the sixteenth century, told the story of a Catholic Englishwoman who, during the reign of Elizabeth I, crossed the Channel to Mishagen to profess her vows as a nun. Born in 1547, at 21 she joined a group of exiled English Bridgettines, an exclusively female and relatively newly established religious order based on the mysticism and Marian devotion of St Bridget of Sweden. Her vocation to the religious life itself, the anonymous author emphasised, was long-held: ‘she had this vision in her sleepe that she was brought to a churche where all her common apparel was changed for another kinde of habitt’. It was, however, her commitment to the Bridgettines in particular that was stressed, and it was demonstrated through shared dress: ‘After seeing the same habitt as her dream, she cried and said “For this is the habitt… whiche I muste weare, and none other.”’ The community aspects of this shared uniform, of visually differentiating herself from the laity, of materially aligning herself with her new sisters and of using her new habit as manifestation of her piety, aligned with the physical demonstrations of community that English women religious had enacted for centuries.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Bridgettine women that Mary Champney joined had, merely generations before, resided in Syon Abbey, the largest, wealthiest convent in England. Founded in 1415 as part of Henry V’s religious reforming programme, the order itself was just over 150 years old when Mary Champney professed her vows. Within decades Syon Abbey became renowned for its spiritual vibrancy, with a particular Bridgettine focus on the importance of texts and the religious benefits gained through reading. Home to some of the noblest young women in England, Syon was well connected with both the aristocracy and fifteenth- and sixteenth-century royalty; these English Bridgettines formed and maintained patronage links and friendships with some of the most notable Catholic thinkers and writers of the age. The women of Syon Abbey were involved and connected in the political and religious world of Tudor England, and remained so after their exiled relocation to the continent. Here they continued to maintain these relationships and spiritual vitality. The fact that it was the women of this convent that Mary Champney chose to join is no coincidence; known for their spiritual and political strength and centrality to English religious life both before and after their Suppression, both in the country and away from it, these Bridgettine sisters made up a hugely important and actively involved part of the English Catholic community.

It was the literary construction of her life that continued and informed this exiled convent’s relationship with their national community back home. Describing Mary as having been ‘raysed upp of God in the midst of a stiffnecked nation to the confusion and condempnacion of the so vngodly’, the anonymous author made an explicit reference to the Dissolution and those forced into recusancy and exile under the Henrician reforms by following with ‘…as have presecuted such saints of God out of their owne foundations and possesyons into forreyne realms to begge their bread… amonge aliens and straungers.’ The production and dissemination of this biography illuminated the role that women like Mary played within their communities; Mary and her sisters were demonstrative of the struggles and sufferings of English Catholicism under Protestant rule. Despite their separation, the Bridgettines in Mishagen were just as much a part of the English Catholic community as those who had never left their home nation. They were united by their shared status as victims of the Protestant age. For Mary, such sufferings ‘which were neuer out of her hande while life was in her… [were] esteemed as a badge and testimony of the unytye of faythe among Godes Catholicke people under one heade in blessed obedience.’[[2]](#footnote-2) The literary construction of her story served to both inspire her community in their struggles and encourage commitment to their religious devotions at moments of greatest adversity.

To be a nun in sixteenth-century England was to be part of several complex, complementary and interlinking communities, as the example of *The Life and Good End* of Mary Champney betrayed. From the moment of profession, a nun became part of the convent itself, defined by much more than the monastery walls. Through these vows, this novice became a new member of a far-reaching, continent-based monastic order, each with its own historical and spiritual identity. The nun’s new life within the convent placed her directly at the heart of her surrounding neighbouring community, where she and her sisters interacted, both spiritually and practically, with the laity. Her role within the convent related to the systems of patronage and interest from secular parties. Nationally too, this nun was part of an intangible community, one formed through a late medieval understanding and adoption of a mystic-inspired, introverted piety evidenced through the vast popularity of these spiritual works between monastic and secular men and women alike. The engagement of her convent with their reading material and visual culture defined and actively informed the shape, purpose and understandings from both within and outside their communities.

The political and religious turbulence that confronted women religious in sixteenth-century England was reflected in the changes to these communities, as the women religious’ very livelihoods were challenged and overturned. Their responses, whether passive or more pre-emptive of the changes their lives were about to undertake, were refracted through these communities, demonstrating continuities of community life and communal connections after the de-structure of their institutional lives. As the sixteenth century drew to a close, these communities had been through systems of re-formation, re-movement and regeneration, with some flourishing and some ceasing to survive. In a century of such intense and fracturing change, the engagement of women religious within each of their varied communities allows fascinating insights into their experiences of reform that have often being historiographically overlooked.

*Historiography of English Nuns in the Middle Ages and Beyond.*

The historiography of sixteenth-century women religious and their communities (or indeed, any community) has provoked fierce and thorough revisionism, as they have been configured and reconfigured within periodised, methodological and religious boundaries. Over the past three decades, the famously negative stereotypes of late medieval and early modern English nuns have been frequently and innovatively challenged. Through works addressing female religious readership, textual exchange, practical lives and spiritual understandings, scholars like Marilyn Oliva have successfully challenged views of historians who regarded ‘nuns in ways which at once trivialised their functions and diminished their significance to other medieval women and its secular society.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Late medieval English female religious retained, up until relatively recently, the dominant views initiated by Eileen Power’s influential *Medieval English Nunneries*, a chronologically-wide study of women religious in England since the foundations of the earliest nunneries to the Dissolution.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Her generalisations about the ‘decline’ of English female monasticism through the decades – indeed centuries – before the Dissolution of the monasteries did not only hold sway for nearly a century but was perpetuated within wide-ranging scholarship.[[5]](#footnote-5) Despite her original ‘marshalling’ of some of the most crucial and wide-ranging primary evidence, historians of male monastic life and within religious histories of England more widely maintained a negative stereotype through a perceived *lack* of evidence suggesting otherwise. Particularly when judged against their male counterparts, the gaps in sources for the female religious life were filled and views coloured with unsavoury pictures of convent life presented by monastic reform records. For many scholars of women religious within the last twenty years, their research into the vibrant textual and practical lives of nuns contradict ideas that their subjects were uniformly religiously lax, lacking in vocation, ignorant of or completely without discipline and in economic dire straits due to the poor household management of its members (the latter blamed, primarily, on their gender).[[6]](#footnote-6)

For the most part however, late medieval English women religious were largely ignored altogether. Broad, magisterial studies on monasticism in England often failed to pay anything more than brief lip-service to nuns and convent life when talking about monasticism (Oliva suggested this with statistical analysis of the mention of nuns within David Knowles’s authoritative three volume history of monasticism in England).[[7]](#footnote-7) Monasticism in England more generally is a subject fairly ill served by the Whiggish, the twentieth-century and the Revisionist interpretations of the late medieval and early modern England. The Protestant-inspired, ‘progress’-centric, Whiggish narrative broadly dismissed monasticism leading up to and within the sixteenth century as lax and unruly, demonstrative of some of the worst of the pre-Reformation excesses written within the contemporary context of Catholic emancipation in Britain.[[8]](#footnote-8) Historians in the mid-twentieth century who engaged with debates about the English Reformation, scholars of the ‘old school’, concentrated more fully on the political influence of Thomas Cromwell and king on the institutions of power and faith, with ‘little or no understanding of the interaction of socio-economic and religious factors.’[[9]](#footnote-9) The Revisionist school that followed chose instead to focus on the local, the parish and the ideological religious experiences of people ‘on the ground’, posing questions of quantifying levels of faith for both Catholics and particularly Protestants that did not engage with the enclosed.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It was the speed and efficiency with which the Dissolution of the monasteries took place and the general lack of public outcry that accompanied it which helped to illustrate this old-school understanding of the English Reformation as a top-down, publicly accepted and firmly institutional movement which went broadly unchallenged. In Chapter Three of this work, the historiography of the past fifty years within this congested field of scholarship will be addressed at greater length, but in terms of the experiences of women religious within these schools of thought, it is fair to say that attention to monasticism, and especially female monasticism, was never addressed as fully as necessary.

The disregarding of the female religious experience is further due to the much periodised nature of scholarship regarding late medieval and early modern England, as opposed to the rest of Europe; Benjamin Thompson affirmed this most clearly, saying that ‘it has always been difficult to think about late medieval monasteries in isolation from what happened to them in the 1530s.’[[11]](#footnote-11) He argued that the Dissolution provides a particular stumbling block of English historiography that the histories of Germany, France and the Low Countries do not face. Sources for the pre-Dissolution monastic houses are frequently disjointed and dispersed, with only the Court of Augmentations records holding information in a systematic and formulised way (this is no surprise, given the formation of this government department was specifically for the task of breaking down religious houses).[[12]](#footnote-12) The devotional texts, material culture and administrative documents were geographically dispersed with speed at the institutionalisation-ary disbanding of these convents, often only surviving in any great number from wealthier and well-connected houses.

Ideological boundaries, however, also appear to play a substantial, if potentially un-conscious, part in the scholarship of pre- and post-Dissolution religious lives. Thompson goes on to suggest that for a medievalist, the closure of monastic houses offers something of a brutal and mournful rupture with the past, with studies rarely crossing over into anything later than the 1540s. Early modern scholarship, however, contrasts the very end of monasticism with the ‘cataclysm that befell them,’ similarly infrequently approaching what came before 1539.[[13]](#footnote-13) Studies addressing women religious in exile into the seventeenth century, recusant Catholicism and the religiosity of England under the later-sixteenth-century Jesuit influence have rarely engaged very deeply or widely with the spirituality and society that provides their precursor despite the roots that nearly all have within pre-Dissolution narratives.[[14]](#footnote-14) Works such as Alexandra Walsham and E. A. Jones’s definitive edited volume *Syon Abbey and Its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion, c. 1400-1700* is one example that crossed these periodised boundaries with regards to a single monastery, but few historians as yet have approached sixteenth-century England as including the building towards and outcomes of the Dissolution.[[15]](#footnote-15)

As the Walsham and Jones example quietly infers, the study of English women religious in this period, despite huge recent steps forward in scholarship regarding the cultural, social, political and religious lives of nuns and their convents, remains heavily focused on certain orders, counties or convents themselves. This is not to belittle the supreme and remarkable achievements of such studies, but more work could be done to place and understand regions, religious orders and specific houses into contexts both national and international. Syon Abbey, the most contemporaneously renowned and without doubt the most studied English convent in recent historiography, stands almost alone in scholarship through a comparative wealth of primary source material. For historians, the Bridgettine convent appeared somewhat paradoxically against the negative images of fellow women religious, seen as part of a ‘vanguard of the [late medieval English] Church,’ whose ‘pious strictness of discipline’ represented a light of obedience and observance in the otherwise darkly lax and laboured female English monasticism.[[16]](#footnote-16) Too often, isolationist historiography seats Syon ‘rather uneasily on the margins [of these projects], as a foil against which the vitality of older orders and smaller monasteries must be reasserted against the disparaging claims of Protestant propaganda and old-style historians.’[[17]](#footnote-17) The lack of nationwide studies continue to fragment and detach women religious from their contemporaries, as they appear boxed off in niche, vastly individualistic frameworks. By judging comparatively between the communities of female religious convents, the uniquely English experiences of reform can be asserted through both important similarities and equally important economic, religious and geographical difference.

*Community and Community Definitions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*

For the purposes of this study, a case-study structure will be employed to explore the experiences of reform for English nuns through their communities. Firstly, English women religious lived within communities enclosed by the convent wall. These communities were created, informed and consistently reformed by materials within and sometimes outside the cloister, as communities were made and remade through textual and visual culture. As nuns, they were engaged in communities of their order, bound by a communal spiritual identity that spanned nations and, furthermore, one which was instilled and continued through engagement with shared and corresponding spiritual material. Their long-held, created and reformed identities as Catholics within divided and emerging Protestant nations again instilled them within communities of national faith, both within their home nation and abroad. In their proximate local communities, female religious houses held a spiritually imperative and highly practical role that was informed and cemented through exchange of materials and engagement with the local laity. These communities were not only multi-form but highly flexible, informing each other and extending rather than remaining indefinitely and fixedly constant.

Using community as a framework for analysis, this study will address the historiographical issues arising from the study of late medieval and early modern monasticism, particularly of enclosed women, through reform and reassertion of their roles and lives. A community-focused study allows for many insights into the lives and identities of women religious (outlined below), but primarily this study will focus on the continuities maintained through a community framework in a wider context. It will be through community as a non-fixed, non-static notion that changes are made, not merely as a result of higher powers and events but rather through regeneration and reconfiguration within the community. It was this near-tradition of movement and renegotiation that will allow insight into the construction and reconstruction of the ways of life of women religious, into the ways in which they were able to react to political and religious upheavals, and into the efforts of resilience made by nuns within these communities against those who fundamentally opposed their ways of life.

Community as a concept empowered and gave agency to its members against changes from above; never was this truer than for women religious. Community allowed their monastic structures to engage with outside lay life, at the same time as creating and recreating the boundaries of their faith, monastic commitment and identity as nuns within their order, their locality and their nation. Community offered a way in which to engage with those in power from socially strong, often institutionally and historically-supported groups. The structures of community furthermore allowed women religious to continue their monastic vocations to greater or lesser extents after the Dissolution, helping them fight to preserve and regenerate their vocation in new and varied forms.

Community as a framework for analysis allows the historian to negotiate the aspects of periodisation so often associated with scholarship of sixteenth-century English monasticism. Communities of these women did not die at the Suppression of the monasteries; their boundaries and identities being not merely institutional and encircled by convent walls, but created and consistently recreated well before the mid-sixteenth century, through visual material, textual culture and interaction with each other and the relationships with the laity. With communities of women religious spanning this graphic divide, scholarship can bridge the periodising gap left by previous generations when addressing monasticism and its ‘end’ in England from a fairly top-down, firmly institutional perspective. Furthermore, community offers an innovative way to negotiate the lack of historical material left by these women. Viewed comparatively across the country, patterns of community and connections between each other and their surroundings can be asserted, placing this study out of the realms of isolationist historiography when addressing individual religious orders, regions or even specific houses. Lastly, using community as a framework can help to redress the balance still being levelled in studies of English women religious against an old-style historical view of laxity and permissiveness in their female characters. Seen through the lens of community, English women religious are active participants in the creation and reformation of their own communities across challenging times.

Community is not, however, an easy definition to come by nor has it been infrequently enough affirmed to suggest something entirely new. Both as a definition itself and within the scholarship that surrounds it, communities are always complex and multifaceted; as Michael Halvorson and Karen E. Spierling asserted in the introduction to their influential edited work *Defining Community in Early Modern Europe,* the danger in defining community and applying it uniformly, ‘lies not in trying to analyse community dynamics but in attempting to impose too great a clarity, simplicity or transparency on the operations of any particular community.’[[18]](#footnote-18) As a term, ‘it has proved to be highly resistant to satisfactory definition… perhaps for the simple reason that all definitions contain or imply theories, and the theory of community has been very contentious.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Miri Rubin further argued that the concept is misused by historians as a ‘static notion [that…] whitewashes shades of tension and difference.’[[20]](#footnote-20) The fact that this work will address communities of different sorts and through different forms – textual, devotional, local, enclosed, and national – complicates the definition even more; the variations that will be primarily addressed here will have their uniqueness affirmed through conscious and subconscious constructions in later chapters. This introductory chapter will define the term to be mainly used – that of geographical and commonality community – while the more specific and unique terms will be addressed more thoroughly in the chapter individually addressing them.

It is a subject that, like that of English monastics before and after the Dissolution, has fallen considerably along periodised lines. Michael C. Questier suggested that most scholars have been limited to ‘recusancy study’ when discussing English Catholicism in the second half of the sixteenth-century, meaning that it ignores discrepancies and nuances: ‘inevitably, the Catholic community, as portrayed in such studies, takes on a uniformity which is extremely hard to reconcile with many contemporary accounts of the variegated nature of Catholicism.’[[21]](#footnote-21) Such works begin primarily with historians debating the very existence at all of Catholic ‘community’ in England during Protestant reform. Christopher Haigh summed up this school of thought (before revising it substantially) by saying that ‘such assertions of an absence of organic continuity between medieval and recusant Catholicism can be placed within a more general argument of the relationship between medieval popular religion and post-Reformation disciplined Christianity.’[[22]](#footnote-22)

Haigh further asserted that while these arguments of spiritual and organic discontinuity in the Catholicism of sixteenth-century England are partly based on contemporary Catholic discourse (used in later decades to distance themselves from what had come to be seen as the ‘ramshackle Medieval church’), they overlook in particular the situation of grass-roots level devotion throughout the ‘transitional’ middle of the century.[[23]](#footnote-23) Revisionists of such ‘discontinuity’ have, as Melissa Franklin Harkrider asserted, ‘demonstrated that local communities still committed to the rituals and clergy of the medieval Church frequently circumvented the legislative reforms’ enacted by government.[[24]](#footnote-24) It is clear that for many working on the Catholicism of the period, who judge the upkeep of popular devotion from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective, that the first aspect of community definition is unsurprisingly geographical and based within a parish locality.

The rise of the parish, an ‘achievement of the Middle Ages’, as understood by Beat A. Kumin, extended through ‘parochial networks’ of ‘increasing resources […], the development of new liturgical and social customs [and] a growth in secular and voluntary communal activities’, that was later turned into a ‘local government unit’ by Tudor legislation.[[25]](#footnote-25) However for Kumin, a parish and a parish community were not completely one and the same; the definition of a parish community before it was legally identified was ‘a common sense acknowledgement of the existence of a geographically designed religious and social unit with certain collective responsibilities and the capability to act […] as a quasi-corporate body,’ while a parish remained ‘a township or cluster of, having its own church, and ministered to by its own priest.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Furthermore, he addressed the discrepancies in geographical parish size across the nation: according to the *Valor ecclesiasticus*, South Eastern parishes were only three-four square miles, compared to nearly seventy in the North.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Geographical closeness alone then is not enough to accurately measure or define ‘community’ within this work. Ritual has often been judged as a way of forming, keeping together and excluding members from communities, with communities organised and fostered around public pageantry.[[28]](#footnote-28) Dealing with the ‘full spectrum of human experience’, religious rituals in late medieval and early modern Europe reflected ‘a community’s ultimate goals since rituals embody the fundamental directions and desires of a community and its members.’[[29]](#footnote-29) The celebrations, festivals, saints days and other communal activities have long been established as markers of and links to communities in this period, as ‘one of the most effective and public ways to define a community and demonstrate community membership.’[[30]](#footnote-30)

Anthony P. Cohen furthered the idea of ritualistic behaviour in creating close communities through the inclusion or exclusion of others into that of symbols and of the symbolic boundaries that form and, importantly, protect ‘imagined communities.’[[31]](#footnote-31) In arguing that the use of the word is ‘only occasioned by the desire or need to express such a distinction,’ Cohen affirmed the nature of exclusivity in constructing inclusivity; he suggested that boundaries are ‘largely constituted by people in interaction’ with the manipulation of the symbolism that binds them.[[32]](#footnote-32) Yet such boundaries ‘imply different meanings for different people… [and] the boundaries perceived by some may be utterly imperceptible to others.’[[33]](#footnote-33) Such potential discrepancies and differences, therefore, allow for interchangeable membership of various communities as well as accounting for conflicts and disparity within a single one. It was what Cohen called ‘the triumph of community’: community ‘does not clone behaviour or ideas; it is a commonality of forms (ways of behaving) whose content (meanings) may vary considerably among its members… so to contain this variety that its inherent discordance does not subvert the apparent coherence which is expressed by its boundaries.’[[34]](#footnote-34)

Yet, as Jan Assmann established, over time these community-defining symbolic boundaries morph, change and need almost constant reassertion. In his study on cultural memory, Assmann asserted the specifics of community definition throughout the period of that group’s life and how such specifics are remembered and expressed differently. Defining the ‘symbolic universe’ of short-term communicative memory (bound by shared language and the ability to communicate through generations on an everyday, informal level) and long-term cultural memory (focused on fixed points in the past, upon myths and origin stories enacted through formal and ceremonial communications), Assmann suggested that, much like ritual, the basic principle of community lies in the repetition of these two types of memory, depending on the time frame in which the community has existed.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The relationships between geographical proximity, repeated ritual, symbolic boundaries and inherent, expressive and expressed memory are the links that form and bring together the many communities of the women religious in late medieval and early modern England. Nineteenth-century sociologist Georg Simmel argued that communities were best understood as overlapping, multi-layered, collective ‘circles’ that meet at points of ‘common interest, dispute or compromise.’[[36]](#footnote-36) For Claire Walker, the convent itself was something of a microcosm of all the issues facing the definition of early modern community, and in examining its members and its boundaries, she was able not only to place it as within its own community but to find the ‘intersection’ between convents and their external communities through spiritual, economic and political commonality. It seems appropriate for the purposes of this work that these communities of women religious, so often ‘as fragmented as modern historical opinion about them’, are seen in this way, as overlapping, interconnected ‘circles’ of commonality and collectiveness with organisation and fluxing membership.[[37]](#footnote-37) For women religious in late medieval and early modern England, communities were not structured, easily definable groups but malleable, permeable unions based on commonality and inclusion.

*Case-Studies: Explanations and Descriptions*

This work will address these intersecting communities of women religious and how they negotiated and experienced reform through three case-studies. As might be expected, the experience of reform throughout the late medieval and early modern period is not a uniform one across a country, with convents of different sizes, orders and degrees of wealth undergoing different changes at different rates of time. Of the 138 nunneries in late medieval England, with an estimated two thousand women religious living within them at the turn of the sixteenth century, the choice of convents that could be both exceptional and representative is still a wide one.[[38]](#footnote-38) The choice was made for this study, initially and primarily, on their differences; as will be demonstrated below, the cases had to be both representative of female English monasticism generally whilst displaying some of the unique and individual characteristics that, somewhat ironically, are demonstrative too of the broader understanding of these women.

To understand the building, reforming and continuation of community and spirituality of female convents across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, this study focuses on houses of women religious from different orders, with pronounced and specific (at least, in theory) religious characters. Separated across geographical lines and vastly at odds in terms of financial health, this work uses women within a single order in a particular region against two separate communities to establish a nation-wide picture of the experiences of community and reform across general and more specific studies. In order to gain a representative picture of communal life and experience of women religious, this study focuses on the Cistercian order of nuns based within Yorkshire, housed in twelve small convents, the Dominican house at Dartford in Kent, and, as previously mentioned, Syon Abbey, the Middlesex convent of Bridgettines. What follows is a brief introduction to the history of each house, before an analysis as to why these case-studies were chosen.

The Yorkshire Cistercians have often been historiographically looked at as a collective, with their close succession of foundations, gentry patronage connections and generally even size offering good ground for comparison of the Northern and older-established female monastic experience. The records that remain, though not vast even when taken collectively, paint a varied and vibrant picture of an economically diverse and community-central life, despite the often very small size and poorly endowed monasteries themselves. The records that point to behaviour of the women – visitations, parish records and papal bulls – provide evidence for Eileen Power’s understanding of late medieval nuns’ immorality and lack of discipline; while some of these houses are in-keeping with this recently-challenged stereotype, it is important to remember that such records are only ever meant to record the grossest of misconduct within houses. The following section will determine the relative size, time of foundation and vital statistics of Dissolution, adding details where appropriate and where available as to individual women, their pensions and patron saints.

Founded in the 1150s by Robert de Verli, a priest from a gentry Norman family, Swine Priory became the wealthiest of all Yorkshire Cistercian nunneries, surviving the initial Dissolution centuries later with a reasonably good reputation and a relatively large number of enclosed women.[[39]](#footnote-39) It appears that up until the early fourteenth century, the priory, dedicated to Cistercian-central Virgin Mary, could well have been a mixed house, though this remains very uncertain. Records confirmed by Henry II suggest that both ‘brethren and nuns’ were members of Swine, and in 1344, four decades later, ‘the former charters of Edward I and Henry II are spoken of as made to the “master and canons of the house of Swine”, while the second charter of Henry II is more particularly alluded to as having been to the “church of St Mary in Swine and the nuns there.”’[[40]](#footnote-40) While the facts remain unclear (are these charters referring to a Gilbertine male house, somehow related to Swine Priory?), in the later fourteenth and throughout the fifteenth centuries, the Priory appears to have lost its administrative connection, and continued to be closely related in agricultural and business terms with members of the local community. Though being worth less than half the necessary £200 to avoid the 1536 minor Dissolution (though at just over £82, was considerably wealthier than its Yorkshire Cistercian contemporaries), Swine Priory was made exempt under the leadership of Helen Deyn in October 1537, and welcomed a number of nuns from smaller, recently closed Yorkshire priories.[[41]](#footnote-41) A place of presumed hospitality during the Pilgrimage of Grace, Swine Priory eventually surrendered on the 9th September 1539, leaving Prioress Dorothea Knight and nineteen nuns. Pensions ranged from Knight’s £13, 6s and 8d. to 40 shillings.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Its mid-twelfth-century contemporary Sinningthwaite Priory, again dedicated to St Mary, was founded in 1155 by a gentry tenant of Roger de Mowbray, Bertram Haget, and appears to have had aristocratic connections from the outset: Janet Burton pointed to de Mowbray’s ratification of the foundation and the additional endowment to the nuns, made by Bertram’s son Geoffrey (incidentally, his daughter Gundreda later become a nun there, and gifted a church to the Priory).[[43]](#footnote-43) Valued at just over £60 in 1535, the house of only nine nuns was surrendered by their last Prioress, Katherine Foster, on 2nd August just a year later. Three of these women transferred to other Cistercian houses in the region, and although wills of many of these women survive, often involving their fellow ex-enclosed women as inheritors, their collective pension list does not.

The foundation of the tiny priory of Esholt, valued at only £13 in the 1535 valuation, is surrounded in uncertainty. Sources are unclear on exactly who founded the monastery; Clay suggested it has links with both Sinningthwaite founder Galfred Haget and the Ward family, but Burton points to a papal bull of 1172 confirming Esholt’s status as a grant to Haget’s original Priory, gifted from Simon Ward and his wife and son.[[44]](#footnote-44) The Ward family continued as consistent patrons to Esholt throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and, as Valerie Spear suggests, ‘was administered for much of its history by women from prominent local families of the gentry class’, with ‘women from the Ward family… elected as prioress several times until 1497.’[[45]](#footnote-45) By 1184, the House established itself as an independent and was dedicated to both the Virgin Mary and St Leonard, one of the only Yorkshire Cistercian houses to be so. Despite its size and perhaps because of the support of wealthy local families, Esholt survived until the second wave of Dissolution, surrendering on the 29th August 1539 with nine nuns. All pensions, besides Prioress Joan Jenkynson’s £6, were 26s and 8d.

Janet Burton put the foundation of the equally tiny Cistercian monastery of Ellerton on Swale at around 1200, and no later than 1227. Valued at just under £3 in 1291, Clay suggested this is another monastery with unclear foundation origins: ‘Said to have been founded by Warnerius, the dapifer to the Earl of Richmond in the reign of Henry II’, fitting with the status and period of contemporary Cistercian nunneries.[[46]](#footnote-46) Worth £15 10s and 6d in the *Valor ecclesiasticus*’s assessment, the Priory was dissolved after surrender in August 1536, housing just half a dozen nuns, three of whom transferred to Swine and Nunappleton. According to Drs Layton and Legh in their valuations, Basedale Priory, another house dedicated to the Virgin (and holders, they believed, of the Virgin’s milk), was founded by Sir Ralph Everes in Hoton, and settled at Basedale after a prolonged period of moving across the region.[[47]](#footnote-47) Surrendered in the second wave of Dissolution, Basedale was found to be worth an around-regional-average of £20, though eight out of nine remaining nuns, besides the prioress, were given just 20 shillings in their pensions.[[48]](#footnote-48)

‘A poor and otherwise undistinguished house’, Hampole Priory became famous and the ‘cult-centre’ of famous mystic Richard Rolle, marked by Legh and Layton as having ‘a superstition to St Richard who was not canonised.’[[49]](#footnote-49) The Priory was founded around 1170 by Avice de Tany and her husband William de Clarefai, and their gifts of three churches were subsequently confirmed to the nuns by their grandson Roger. Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Hampole does not seem to have financially benefitted too greatly from the fame brought upon it by Rolle’s tenure, but as certainly one of the wealthier houses in the region; valued at just over £63 in 1535, and having successfully sought exemption in the years before, none of the nineteen women religious received less than a £2 pension. Five of these nuns do not appear on the 1535 records, suggesting that, perhaps because of its reputation, Hampole Priory was a popular place for nuns to move to, once their own house had surrendered.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Founded in Dewsbury by Reiner le Fleming and confirmed in 1236 by Henry III, Kirklees Priory is, oddly, famous for its Prioress having allegedly killed the mythical Robin Hood (and whose reputed grave sits in the graveyard remains).[[51]](#footnote-51) Again dedicated to the Virgin and to St James, the nunnery, which owned the church of Mirfield, was granted an exemption from surrender in 1538 having been valued at just under £20 in the *Valor ecclesiasticus*. Just over eighteen months later, all seven nuns including the Prioress were dismissed with a pension of 33-40 shillings.[[52]](#footnote-52) The tiny nunnery of Keldholme, believed to hold a finger of St Stephen and part of the Holy Cross, was founded as part of Robert III de Stuteville’s re-establishment of family estates after their banishment in 1106.[[53]](#footnote-53) Keldholme was founded around 1166, dedicated to St Mary and established with land and a mill from their patron, and despite having only six nuns at the time of their surrender in the first wave of Dissolution, it was relatively wealthy, certainly when compared to their contemporaries of similar size - £29, 6 s and 1d.[[54]](#footnote-54) No pension lists survive for the house. The poor nunnery of Handale, worth just over £13 in 1535, managed to resist the minor Dissolution and remained together until the 23rd August 1539, when 8 nuns and their Prioress were left with pensions ranging from £6 to 26 shillings.[[55]](#footnote-55) Founded by William de Percy, a son of a prominent Yorkshire family, sometime around the turn of the thirteenth century, the Priory was dedicated yet again to the Virgin Mary and was valued as having an orchard, a water mill and a graveyard.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Nunappleton Priory, made famous in the satirical Andrew Marvell poem ‘On Nun Appleton House’, has the distinction of being the only Yorkshire Cistercian house exclusively founded by a woman.[[57]](#footnote-57) Alice de St. Quintin, alongside her son Robert, not only made a grant to the nuns in the mid twelfth century, but had her daughter Agnes witness the chapter alongside male observers.[[58]](#footnote-58) The patronage of Agnes and her daughters continued throughout the twelfth century. After being made exempt from Suppression in 1538, Nunappleton’s Prioress Anna Lanketon finally surrendered in December 1539, leaving a relatively wealthy House (nearly £74, behind only Swine in monetary value) and nineteen nuns.[[59]](#footnote-59) Three of these women had transferred to Nunappleton after their own houses had been suppressed.

Valued at £23 in 1291, Rosedale is, by contrast, one of the most obscure of the Yorkshire Cistercian nunneries, with the only information given by Legh and Layton besides the rents is that it was founded by the King.[[60]](#footnote-60) Burton pointed to a charter that, though a foundation charter does not remain, makes clear that the founder was William FitzTurgis, established sometime before 1160.[[61]](#footnote-61) The house of eight nuns did not survive the first wave of Dissolution, and pension lists do not survive. The Prioress, Mary Marshall, received a not-insubstantial pension of £6. Both houses were dedicated to St Mary. The last of the Yorkshire Cistercian nunneries, Wykeham Priory, was one of the larger Houses, endowed with twenty-four acres of land by their founder Pain FitzOsbert around 1153.[[62]](#footnote-62) Twelve nuns were members of the community by the time of their August 1539 surrender, when their long-time Prioress Katherine Nandyke (who gained a pension of just over £6) submitted to the King.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Most Cistercian historians echo the sentiments of Gerald of Wales, who commented on the sheltered but industrial piety of the order – ‘settle the Cistercians in some baron retreat which is hidden away in some overgrown forest: a year or two later you will find splendid churches there and fine monastic buildings.’[[64]](#footnote-64) Yorkshire provided the seclusion necessary for the specifically contemplative piety of the Cistercians, who, though not cut off from the world, were certainly sheltered in their monastic communities and ‘stood at the helm of religious developments.’ They were deeply committed to firmly twelfth-century ‘burgeoning interests’ on the humanity of Christ and the Virgin, upon mystic meditation and compassion. Yet the reputation of these convents, seen through visitation records and near-contemporary accounts, appears low: Cross talks about the ‘depressing regularity’ of sexual immorality in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Yorkshire houses, with several of the most famous cases taking place in Cistercian convents (in a record on 1536, four nuns in these twelve small houses are noted to have babies or be pregnant, including a prioress).[[65]](#footnote-65) Taken alongside the fact that no single convent in this group has enough remaining source material to do a comparative study with two of the biggest centres of female monasticism in the country, the study will address each of these houses as a geographically and order-determined collective; demonstrative of the most common problems and issues facing the majority of English female monasticism, the Yorkshire Cistercians are notable still for their spiritual foundations as well as the typicality of their post-Dissolution English female monastic experiences.

Situated on the bank of the Thames in the Middlesex parish of Isleworth, Syon Abbey demonstrates for historians ‘a spirit of renewal’; founded as part of royal early fifteenth-century plans for monastic renewal, Henry V established the convent ‘especially in honour of the most holy St Bridget,’ a saint to whom he was not only personally devoted, but who appealed to his understandings of anti-heretical zeal, sacral kingship and personal piety.[[66]](#footnote-66) E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham traced the origins of Henry’s Bridgettine devotion back to his sister’s marriage to the king of Sweden in 1406: a member of her entourage, Henry FitzHugh, who later became Henry V’s chamberlain, visited the motherhouse of the Bridgettine order at Vadstena. From this is can be concluded that he introduced this devotion to a king who it resonated with so deeply.[[67]](#footnote-67) Founded with £100 per annum from the crown, Henry also brought in French nuns to establish the house firmly within a strict, disciplined monasticism.

The richest female monastery in the country determined and maintained a reputation as the very heart of Late Medieval English spirituality. Their emphasis on compassionate, Christ-centric piety, as well as their deep connection to the most famous mystics (many of them female) and, like their patron saint, their deep-rooted Marian devotion not only manifested itself in a thriving spiritual and textual culture, but appealed squarely to the hallmarks of lay piety. In addition, their anti-royal involvement with the ‘King’s Great Matter’ in the early 1530s, their often subtle but decidedly resistant measures against the reforming parliament and their survival in exile have made them, understandably, perfect historical foils against the perceived weaknesses of their contemporaries.

Unlike the other case studies, Syon Abbey was less than two centuries old when it was dissolved in 1539. Apart from the longest established Benedictine houses, Syon was valued as the richest monastery of men or women religious in England, being worth £1,735 so escaped the 200l monastic cut-off in the smaller Suppression by a huge margin.[[68]](#footnote-68) It was ‘by statute’ made up of sixty nuns, a handful of lay sisters, seventeen monks and eight lay brothers, ‘and in the early sixteenth century it fell little short of this total.’[[69]](#footnote-69) Knowles pointed to the aristocratic names among the sisters, suggesting, importantly for later chapters, ‘a strangely complete epitome of recusant lists of a succeeding age.’[[70]](#footnote-70) In 1539 the community broke up (it was never formally dissolved), leaving fifty-six women and seventeen men to keep within quasi-monastic communal groups. They were recalled by Mary I in 1557, but after less than two years were dissolved again and forced, alongside their Dominican female religious counterparts and their Carthusian brethren, to go into exile abroad.

It remains difficult to write any kind of history of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English female monasticism without Syon Abbey’s inclusion. The relative wealth of remaining sources – sources that date over an entire century with very few glaring empty spaces – makes them a natural choice, and given their exceptional engagement with so many Late Medieval and Early Modern communities, their place within this study is an assured one. Yet seen as a case study, the similarities as well as differences Syon has with the Yorkshire Cistercians and the similarly-sized house of Dartford can be asserted, contextualising this unique but not entirely separate convent and its inhabitants from the experiences of contemporaries. Richer, younger, more influential, closer to the continent and to royal patrons, and of substantially better contemporary reputation, Syon does indeed represent one end of the sixteenth-century female monastic spectrum, but the experiences of these Bridgettine women religious cannot and should not be divorced from those of their poorer, less connected sisters.

The Dominican priory of Dartford was formed around the mid fourteenth century. Building upon a ‘tradition of patronage of the Dominican order by French and English royalty’, the Kent convent was founded by Edward III and retained close links to London and, to a lesser extent, royalty, throughout its lifetime. First inhabited by French nuns brought over because of their knowledge of stringent Dominican ideals, Dartford was dedicated to the austere principles of poverty, chastity, communal charity and obedience. The single house of its order in the country, Dartford fostered not only a reputation as a centre of learning and of contemplative spirituality, but also of being heavily aware, through the strict discipline enforced, of the vastly separating sense of Dominican identity. Lee addresses this particular individual ideal when judging their Prioress’s strong reaction to the convent taking on nuns professed at other houses after the Suppression, stating that: ‘Every nun within Dartford Priory, from the most junior postulant to the prioress, had been trained, professed and had served in no monastery other than Dartford… They, therefore, had much in common with each other which made them different from other nuns.’[[71]](#footnote-71)

Dartford Priory was valued in the *Valor ecclesiasticus* as being worth just over £360, making it comfortably one of the wealthiest female houses in England.[[72]](#footnote-72) They were dissolved in April 1539, having sworn the Oath of Supremacy four years previously. Pensions were granted ranging from £100 for the Prioress, to 40 shillings for the lay sisters. Despite having twenty six sisters at the Dissolution, only seven returned after requesting their monastery back during Mary’s re-establishment of the monasteries (their old Priory had been the home given to Anne of Cleves by her royal ex-husband until her death in 1557). Unlike their swearing of the Oath of Supremacy in the mid-1530s, the Dominican women refused to do so at the start of the Elizabeth reign and, in a group consisting of ‘two priests, the prioress, four choir-nuns… four lay sisters and a young girl not yet professed’, they crossed the Channel and resumed a nomadic monastic life in exile.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Their involvement in trade, education and financial exchange placed them at the heart of several ‘material, symbolic, textual, political and spiritual economies in ways which at times harmonised with and at times conflicted with each other,’ making them not only the seventh richest nunnery in the country, but popular and engaged with those around them.[[74]](#footnote-74) It is because of both these traits – the uniqueness and the everyday businesses – that make Dartford such an interesting case study: through a strong order-ed identity, a geographical and heritage-related link to the royal household and a religiosity that was representative of piety prevalent across the country, this relatively-unstudied Dominican house connects the exceptional house of Syon with the more commonly-asserted ideas of female English monasticism found in the Yorkshire Cistercians.

*Methodology and Sources*

The comparative aspect of these three case-studies is, somewhat paradoxically, made both more difficult by the scarcity of primary material outlining the lives of English women religious, and provides important and innovative ways to lighten these dark spaces. Scholarship has not always, however, seen this deficiency in sources as anything approaching an opportunity; often it has exacerbated the limited approaches that historiography has so frequently afforded English nuns. The remaining sources, while interesting and informative in their own right, need to be judged together in order to create a balanced and comprehensiveunderstanding of community experience for women religious. In addition, this work will employ a further comparative dimension of asserting, where appropriate, the experiences and evidence of these English women religious with their German female contemporaries. This section will outline the problems in approaching the source material, how these problems will be overcome, how the material will be approached, and lastly, describe the material used. The comparative and prosopographical theories will be discussed as part of this method, and the need for inter-disciplinary analysis will be asserted and explained within their scholarship context.

It is an often-repeated fact within histories of English female religious that so little remains of their lives; from the physicality of their homes to their reading material, from their correspondence to their record keeping, what does remain offers barely a glimpse. Students of English nuns are nearly completely without so many of the sources that provide the bulk of cultural or gendered studies in either the medieval or early modern periods; diaries, letters, log books, receipts, reading material, clothing, decorations, religious ornaments and other material culture miscellanea are largely out of reach. This is due to the nature of the Suppression, from an economic and practical standpoint; while the Court of Augmentations was set up primarily to deal with the huge influx of wealth and land the state had to deal with over a sudden time period, the records make it clear what was and was not a priority within the houses. These visitation records of the mid 1530s outline only the rawest of materials that make up the convents (as Chapter Three will go on to state, the lead in the buildings was a huge economic draw noted in these documents, as were the prices of wood, the surrounding out buildings and pastures) rather than anything regarding the interior, religious or domestic lives of the inhabitants. Approaches to the Dissolution and the English Reformation tend to take a highly institutionalised view of the changes and communities involved; for women religious, so little remains in the way of administrative and legal documents that it is very difficult to gather anything like a balanced picture of their communities that does not fit within the negative, specific view of female monasticism.

Furthermore, the miscellanea that belonged and made up convent life was, if it was addressed, ridiculed by the contemporary visitors as superstitious and unnecessary. It is clear that the survival of female monastic records across nearly two hundred houses of relatively small and impoverished religious groups was not a priority. The dispersal of these houses across the country additionally diminishes the chance of systematic and collective archiving of material, as the current place of so many records attests to.[[75]](#footnote-75) This amounts to not only a general lack of material, but a narrow field of institutional sources surviving in bulk that only illuminate a limited understanding.

It is the sources that remain in fragments that the lives and experiences of women religious can be glimpsed (and will be described more comprehensively below). The purpose of this project is to understand not simply the exclusive experiences of nuns within a single convent but across a whole county; there is neither enough material within many single religious houses to be viable options for study, nor would a single house work provide answers to these communally-centric questions. The comparative dimension of this project between the case-studies will address these difficulties; not only will the case-study aspect articulate a representative analysis of women religious across regional, economic and religious divides, but they will articulate these marginal sources as responsive to change and context, defining and understanding the formation and reformation of community through the parallels between them despite surface differences.

To aid the understanding of communities of women religious going through reform in the late medieval and early modern periods, this study will also employ a comparative aspect with their contemporary sisters in Germany. While their Reformation context is different, parallels can be drawn between these Continental women and the women of Syon, Dartford and the Yorkshire Cistercians. Both made up interconnected and multi-layered communities of women within the convent and those outside, and were able, often autonomously, to reform and create these communities. Both sets of communities experienced a fundamental change in the reaction and acceptance of their religious vocation and way of life, and both were forced to react and alter their lives within these communities as the Reformation, whether ideological or institutional, progressed.

The parallels between English and German women religious have not been looked at in-depth by scholars. The works of Amy Leonard and Merry Wiesner-Hanks illuminated the fascinating lives and experiences of nuns facing incredible political and religious upheaval in late medieval and early modern Germany and have employed innovatively (in Wiesner Hanks’ case, ground-breaking) gendered methods in exploring their cultural remains and political contexts.[[76]](#footnote-76) The quality and quantity of the material for these women offers, by contrast to England, a huge range of potential for the study of houses and regions across the period, with many works by the women themselves surviving. These illuminative letters and diaries allow the historian to hear the voice of German nuns as they articulated and formed their communities; it is a privilege rarely afforded to scholars of their English sisters.

The comparative aspect with Germany, then, provides an obvious source-based point of difference and crucially a natural reason to include it in this study. When building a case with the English examples yet finding gaps in both scholarship and primary material, the German examples offer more complete understandings through which to draw conclusions; if evidence points to an implication for the communities of English women religious and the German comparison confirms this through a more complete source base, it allows for a more certain and clarified judgement. Yet the nature of this comparison is not merely to fill in the blanks left by sixteenth-century reformers and governmental visitors. It will build a case within the limits of what both sources can offer of the communal links between these international women religious across their specific order-ed and geographical identities.

Using methods from prosopographical study this work will, through the collection and comparison of scarce sources, build an understanding of the interconnected communities of the case-studies and how they experienced reform and change. By addressing different case studies both in England and Germany, this work will address some of the methodological issues arising from a subject when sources are so relatively scarce; as Koenraad Verboven, Myriam Carlier and Jan Dumolyn stated, one of the main problems facing every historian, but one to be particular aware of where primary material is in short supply, is the danger of ‘drawing conclusions from individual cases and of generalising from a handful of eloquent examples.’ In borrowing some of the theoretical framework employed by prosopography to examine the experiences of reform across a country, this work will analyse the nuns in different places and with different background in the hope that ‘the particular characteristics of that population as a whole become visible.’[[77]](#footnote-77) The same questions cannot be asked of all primary material across the case-studies, meaning that answers will never be neatly applicable or directly comparable, but links can still be asserted and parallels all the more preciously mined.

This study will not be employing the computer-based, statistical analysis of all data gathered, as found within ‘elite’ prosopographical works, but will instead utilise connections found between the two ‘schools’ of prosopographical methodology: the study will address the concerns of ‘mass’ scholars who investigate social ties and connections between people through the ‘elite’ system of small-scale case studies. K. S. B. Keats-Rohan suggested that, while the schools of ‘mass’ and ‘elite’ prosopography are less distinguishable than in the years before ‘increased social science methods and [the use of] computers by historians,’ the more recent trends link to what Dion Smyth termed ‘traditional’ vs ‘new’ prosopography. Traditional prosopographies ‘concentrate data fragments about individuals, which, when placed together in a broader series… can form patterns that are significant as they change through time.’, while ‘new’ focuses on ‘advances in computing power and techniques.’[[78]](#footnote-78) For the purposes of this study, the more traditionalist approach will be employed; it will be through these fragmentary pieces of primary material, material that often does not correspond neatly or exactly, that parallels of behaviour, feeling and experience can be distinguished and drawn out through individual case studies. This study will apply questions central to this method, focused on ‘fairly small groups over a limited period of not much more than a hundred years, when the data is drawn from a very wide variety of sources’ and ‘when the study is directed to solving a specific problem’.[[79]](#footnote-79) This work will address each of its female monastic case studies through their communities, comparing the results to develop an understanding of both them specifically and as a nation overall.

The remaining textual evidence for English women religious is split broadly into three groups within this study: the first is mainly institutional, administrative evidence, with the majority of surviving and relevant records belonging to the Court of Augmentations and addressing the Suppression of these monastic houses; the second are cultural written sources, the brief and precious letters and diaries written by and about the women religious; and the third are the vital devotional texts used by all women religious to define and inform their faith and their practical lives. While this first group of records offer fascinating detail in some areas – the religious relics detailed in the Yorkshire visitations records, for instance, give understandings that would otherwise have been impossible to uncover – the visitation records of the 1530s, written by Thomas Cromwell’s investigators into monastic corruption and economic situations, present formulaic and at times exaggerated insight into these religious communities.

They offer a negative viewpoint because of the very nature of the source existence: to discover reasons to justify monastic closure. The Oaths of Supremacy survive in only a very limited capacity, and fail to explain the context behind them. The surveys and possession lists that make up the Court of Augmentations, papers that detail the material state of the monastic lands at the Dissolution and that ‘managed the former endowments of the monasteries and chantry institutions’, again fail in and of themselves to provide a broad picture of the communities of women religious. Convents had not been built and sustained with a great amount of surviving legal paperwork, and to judge their relationships and behaviours by what remains in this way is to broadly misrepresent their lives.[[80]](#footnote-80) To judge the state of nunneries prior to their Suppression through these alone presents at best an incomplete picture and at worst something wholly lacking.

The second type/category of textual primary material that is useful for the purposes of this work are cultural sources, particularly the biographies and letters of women religious. They offer a more complete picture of convent life, and their communications and understandings of communities, even if these sources offer only limited and incredibly rare glimpses. Letters from the Abbesses of Syon and Dartford in the 1530s, and those from the Yorkshire aristocracy and Northern gentry to Thomas Cromwell suggest communities invested and involved in the power relations between them and their secular government. The biography of Mary Champney that begins this work provides textual consolidation of women religious in an engaged community of English Catholics. Letters written by a young nun from exile in the late sixteenth century similarly provides cultural and tangible connections between communities, detailing resistance and strength of unity between her sisters and their friends at home. The main and unavoidable difficulty for these sources, however, is the severely limiting small number of surviving documents. These cultural documents are impossible to use alone, as not only are there not enough to build a case even for an individual house, but even in comparison, for the Yorkshire Cistercians in particular, almost complete silence remains. Their German equivalents, discussed below, provide a comparative for these sources, allowing for contextualisation and broader association.

The third example of primary textual material that illuminates the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century lives of English women religious are the most innovatively studied pieces, the devotional texts of the women religious themselves. As Chapter One will discuss, the study and discovery of the patronage, secular connections and transmissions of these texts remains one of the key intellectual routes into the spiritual and broader lives of women religious. Through this scholars seek to understand female sanctity, literacy, autonomy and networks of internal and external communication. Devotional texts provide, more so than any other type of remaining textual source, insights into how these women related to their faith, the devotional trends of the period, and their religious order-ed identity. Syon Abbey in particular provides extraordinary material, leaving behind records of their library and several manuscripts that provide insightful glimpses into not only what they were reading, but how they were reading, when they were reading, and who was involved in these processes. Dartford Priory, while leaving only half a dozen works that are still accessible, suggests similarly interconnected findings with their outside world. Again, however, the limits of these sources rest in their scarcity; for the Yorkshire Cistercians, only three manuscript and a handful of textual references from wills remain for the entire county of female Cistercian religious.

The limits of these textual materials suggest primarily that none of the three types of text can be looked at and used effectively individually; the study of women religious needs an interconnected and innovative approach to textual evidence when asking questions of scope and nuance within communities. This theory of understanding texts not merely as a product of what they *say* has been championed by intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra. He dismissed the ‘documentary’ style of historical methodology employed within social and political history, where scholars read texts as if they were ‘simply sources of information’ yet fail to recognise them as ‘important events in their own right’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Documentary readings, he argued, ‘always threatens to reduce significant texts to a redundant or merely suggestive status… [when] such a reading may blind one to the textual dimensions of documents or the ways they are not simply transparent representations of reality.’[[82]](#footnote-82) With regards to the textual material left to the historian from late medieval and early modern women religious, such a ‘documentary reading’ is severely limiting, if not in some cases completely unattainable. For the purposes of this project, the idea of ‘reading between the lines’ with these bodies of texts, to understand the implicit connections between them, to recognise the conscious and subconscious relationships between reader and text, and reader and other readers, is paramount. Even the institutional legal sources of the Suppression offer something more intangible than the factual lists they present.

Furthermore, however, evidence that is not directly textual or that can be approached as a literary construct can and does provide illuminating understandings of the worlds of women religious, and it has, for the most part, been ignored within scholarship. The visual culture of women religious suffers once again from the fragmentary nature of sources remaining after scattering into distant archives, destruction at the hands of time or Dissolution, or even not fitting into the methodologies and narratives of English nun studies. Much of the remaining evidence is piecemeal; the Syon Cope, while fascinating and remarkably preserved, remains the only piece of needlework that is acknowledged as belonging to one these female religious houses. Architecture of surrounding houses survive only in the smallest fragments of stone carvings and through archaeological digs. Woodcuts in a small number of manuscripts once more do not reach representatively across even a small number of female convents. Only the monastic seals that survive across almost every house in the case studies of this work suggest a properly comparative representation of their contemporary visual culture.

Sources that suggest and make up the visual culture of late medieval and early modern women religious have to be looked at thematically and comparatively, piecing together understandings of material and image to form connected communities. Furthermore, ingenuity must be employed to draw out visual references where possible; devotional manuscripts, while offering important information in terms of illustration and material culture, also allow insights into something of a ‘visual literacy’ of their female religious readers. Metaphors, similes and lyrical descriptions of visual material add dimensions to this source base and how it must be interacted with, promoting understandings for the modern reader of both how this book/text/source was engaged with by its fifteenth- and sixteenth-century reader, and the porous, interdisciplinary nature of engaging with rare and limiting primary source material for the modern scholar. Textual and visual culture primary sources offer interconnected understandings of female religious life and must subsequently be addressed by historians in similar forms of parallel.

The study of visual culture has remained difficult to theoretically define, especially in regards to its relationship with art history (and it is not the intention of this work to offer any definitive solutions).[[83]](#footnote-83) Chapter Two of this work will in particular address the difficulties of defining visual and material culture, especially for medieval studies, but it remains important here to outline the scholarly focuses of visual culture theory to establish the interdisciplinary aspects of this project. This ‘recent shift of art history into the study of… visual culture’ places the study of visual material into historical methodology, suggesting that ‘[if] vision has a cultural history… the historical dimension of vision – and particularly histories *of* vision – must become our object of inquiry.’[[84]](#footnote-84) Such objects of inquiry, however, sit between boundaries of easy classification and discipline, and have often fallen into second place; Vanessa Crosby argued, in her article on illuminated Jewish manuscripts, that while ‘traditionally, art historical studies have treated visual elements as discrete from or secondary to the text… it has become apparent… that textual and visual elements in illuminated manuscripts have a complex and interdependent relationship.’[[85]](#footnote-85) The same case can be argued for the majority of visual culture remnants that made up the lives and surroundings of women religious, as Jeffrey Hamburger has also suggested.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Elina Gertsman and Jill Stevenson, in their introduction to their edited volume on the ‘Liminal spaces’ at the *Thresholds of Medieval Visual* *Culture*, suggested that both the source material itself and the interconnected scholarly interests of historians (‘patronage, word-image relationships, reception theory, gender studies, close visual and textual analysis and performance criticism’) ‘highlight the importance of studying medieval material culture in its many manifestations and valences… to challenge traditional historical and conceptual binaries.’[[87]](#footnote-87) For a subject that defies adequate definition as a discipline at all (as J. A. Walker and S. Chaplin asserted, it might be too premature to label visual culture studies a discipline, but rather label it ‘a hybrid, an inter- or multi-disciplinary enterprise formed as a consequence of a convergence of, or borrowings from, a variety of disciplines and methodologies’), it is not surprising that the material it studies often falls between methodological breaks.[[88]](#footnote-88)

The visual material used in this work crosses boundaries of printed or drawn texts, devotional imagery within written rhetoric and decoration adorning and surrounding these women; imagery that often overlaps and suggests interconnections and themes between their enclosed female viewers, but that survives only in fragments. As with the textual material, the remaining visual culture that provides the material for this study needs heavy contextualising and the implications drawing out in relation to each other, rather than often presenting a ‘documentary’ reading. It is the ‘exploration of such thresholds – connecting the visual and verbal, the sensory and the performative…’ that drives the analysis of this thesis.[[89]](#footnote-89) It is within the silences and marginality of these remaining textual and visual culture sources that this study bases itself.

*Chapter Guide*

The aims of this study are broadly two fold. The first aim, addressed in the first and second chapters of this work, is to discover firstly what formed and kept forming communities of English women religious in the late medieval period; how the inhabitants understood their own communities, and how materials and mentalities made and remade these communities at times of difficulty, change and through growth. Secondly, through the third and fourth chapters, this study aims to understand and illuminate the continuities of communities of women religious in England after the institutional frameworks of their houses and ways of life had been disbanded; how communities were maintained, how boundaries of female autonomy and religiosity were challenged through communities, and what sustained communities through periods of governmental and theological reform. This study will employ a wide range of interconnected, challenging primary sources to present a view different from the predominately institutional interpretations of nunneries in the run up to, and after, the Dissolution of the monasteries. The German comparative aspect will be employed throughout, addressing women religious undergoing the same changes and facing the same challenges, with the aim of shedding further light on the English experience of reform through a community lens.

The first chapter of this work, ‘Practical and Devotional Communities through Text’, addresses the worldly and spiritual engagement of these female monastic houses, and argues that both were formed, supported and encouraged through textual culture. This thesis draws upon the scholarship regarding literary patronage, the connections between secular and enclosed and the impact of European mysticism, and places it in frameworks of ‘devotional’ and ‘practical’ communities. Defining practical communities as the secular world within the locality of the nunnery, the chapter addresses the responsibilities women religious undertook and performed as being informed and as a reflection of what they read. The textual material and their actions often infer a conscious engagement between the two. Using devotional communities to mean broader, intangible and unconscious strands of spiritual connection, the chapter draws links between the case studies through their collective and repeated reading, illuminating the commonality of faith between them. Devotional manuscripts will be the primary source base, as the chapter aims to discover the connections between those that gifted, received and read them, and how such materials informed their communities both in terms of daily practical life, and their spiritual connections more broadly.

The second chapter, ‘The Visual and Material in the Monastic Community’, concentrates on the visual worlds of English women religious, addressing how and in what ways the physical surroundings in convents and employed by nuns were affected by, and inspired by, their spiritual understandings. The chapter draws from and compares the experiences of nuns in Germany with their English counterparts, not only because of the methodological issues of a lack of sources but, importantly, to place the women in an international context. Historiographically too, the theoretical framework for studying women religious and their art and visual culture primarily regards women in German convents, with the only real work undertaken regarding English nuns based upon ground-breaking archaeological work. This chapter aims to bring together both areas while also addressing in new and more complete detail both the remaining physical evidence of the visual and material worlds of the English women religious, and the glimpses seen and remarked upon in written sources.

The first two chapters are intrinsically linked, through timeframe, the limited but illustrative source bases and the method within which such sources are used and understood. Both chapters address the ways in which women religious saw the world and their communities through sources intrinsic to their ways of life – texts and visual culture – and examine how these sources consciously and subconsciously formed their communities and the world around them. Through the examination of textual and material evidence, a more well-rounded and inclusive understanding of their broad and insular lives can be attempted, both of which have received more isolated and piecemeal historiographical attention before. Together, the chapters build a contextual picture of relationships and communities formed through internal and external material before the Reformation, leaving the following to examine the changes in those communities as the secular-enclosed worlds change from engaging to hostility, indifference and quiet (or unquiet) support.

The third chapter, ‘Lineage, Materiality and Resistance: Community through Dissolution’, focuses on the Dissolution and its impact on these communities, examining the negotiations and renegotiations of community space, roles and structure by the women of these convents and the outside world. The involvement of patrons and those connected to the convents in previous centuries and decades at the time of the Dissolution will be investigated through texts, attempting to define the practical and more emotional spiritual connections to these convents that they were attempting to protect from Suppression. The political involvement of Syon Abbey with Elizabeth Barton, seen so often through textual material, will be compared not only with their German contemporary Charitas Pirckheimer and her struggles against the German authorities, but also with Dartford Priory’s subtle negotiation of autonomy and authority through correspondence with Thomas Cromwell. Attempting to provide a response to historiography so frequently focused on the top-down approach of reform and Dissolution, this chapter will address institutional texts of Suppression to investigate the material and visual culture dimensions of Suppression, to further these aspects of community.

‘New Endings and New Beginnings’, the fourth and final chapter, will follow these women religious into their post-Dissolution lives, analysing their communities as they attempt to remain connected, without any of the institutional or sacramental frameworks that once defined them. Through cultural sources written by the women themselves, to an extent far greater than the study has previously had access to, this chapter will shed new light on a period that usually falls so definitively between the periodising historical lines of late medieval and early modern, and of the English Reformation. The communities that remain will be seen both theoretically and practically, and the roles these communities took on in a wider national and international context will be examined through their own words.

The third and fourth chapters, like the first and second, are linked thematically and through content; both can be seen together as illuminating the practical experiences of reform and change of women religious throughout the most turbulent period in their convents’ existence. Following chronologically, these chapters look at the continuities of community through the strengths of commitment and vocation between these women, understandings of monastic life of those around them, and a renegotiation of their roles and lives at points of flux and difficulty. Together, these chapters will bridge the historiographical divide of scholarship that so often ignores women religious, their fate and the Suppression and even the Dissolution itself, using both institutional sources in a new way, and sources that demonstrate as much as we can learn about the women themselves, from their own pens.

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The author of Mary Champney’s life strongly champions her not only as demonstrative of the best of English Catholic morality and strength, but as a symbolic representation of a community fighting to live in the face of untimely destruction, displacement and persecution. Through her struggles and spiritual fervour, Mary is asserted to be an integral part of her convent community through her close relationships with her beloved sisters, her national community against the challenges of the unfamiliar and her spiritual community of a faith in flux and under threat. Her conscious and unconscious engagement with and movement between these communities, often at the same time, was demonstrative of the community experiences of women religious from her home country throughout the sixteenth century. Women religious like Mary experienced the changes and challenges of sixteenth-century England never as a member of simply one group, but unified through several.

***Chapter One: Practical and Devotional Communities through Text***

*Introduction.*

Sometime in the two decades between 1460-1480, it is likely that a book containing two of the most influential and important spiritual works of the late medieval era came into the possession of the Prioress of Dartford.[[90]](#footnote-90) The fly-leaf inscription, asserting that ‘Thys boyk longyth to Dame alys brathwayte the worchypfull prioras’, is followed by the names of two women, the second of whom (‘Orate pro anima Johanne Newmarche’) corresponds to the gilded coat of arms of the preceding page.[[91]](#footnote-91) Her family had been involved in the Dominican house almost since its foundation, with John Dunkin establishing Joan Newmarch’s maternal grandfather as a substantial benefactor of the monastery around the middle of the fourteenth century.[[92]](#footnote-92) Whilst it is possible to venture a ‘why’, then, as to the book’s acquisition into the monastery, an answer to ‘how’ or exactly ‘when’ it started a life at Dartford remains uncertain; Prioress Braithwaite’s notation suggests either the book’s initial presence within the convent, or its increasing use and subsequent importance, correspond to the dates in which she was head of Dartford, but it remains difficult to be any more specific than this educated guess.

This secular and monastic dimension to its ownership, however, corresponds neatly to the contents of the work itself. Containing the second earliest English translation of the *Prickynge of Love*, a devotional treatise popular across Europe on the joys of contemplative life, and the more worldly-focused *Mixed Life* by Walter Hilton, the *Stimulus amoris*, or MS Harley 2254 as it was later be known, reflected two of the most important elements in late medieval English spirituality for pious laity but particularly for contemporary religious.[[93]](#footnote-93) For the later fifteenth-century Dominican readers of this text, their place within both their local lay area and their understanding of their religious character was mirrored and informed in the pages of these texts.

For late medieval women religious, their devotional texts formed and informed both their practical and spiritual roles as communities, and their understanding of the devotional community of which they were an essential part. Works like the *Stimulus amoris* are beautifully illustrative of the community layers provided through these works; in delivering devotional guidance, texts like these inform the ways in which nuns understand their faith, and how their faith should be engaged with. The inclusion of works that promote active, practical work within their local communities provided an understanding of their role as not simply enclosed and contemplative, but as having an important, spiritually-imperative worldly job. Lastly, some of these texts provided an unconscious link to the outside world, demonstrating the enclosed sisters’ role within a spiritual community through shared texts and devotional understandings. For the women of Dartford Priory, the Yorkshire Cistercians and Syon Abbey, texts were an imperative part of establishing, continuing and re-establishing community feeling and involvement with the convent and beyond.

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What Brian Stock called ‘a textual community’ will provide the starting point for this chapter’s understanding. His idea that the content and use of written texts structure ‘collective ideas’ and ‘behavioural deviations’ that form a ‘collective consciousness’ around the text itself is a key and paramount theory in late medieval historiography, particularly in the cases of women: some of the most prominent (and in some cases, only) evidence in an area of scholarship of notoriously limited sources remains the books held by the women themselves and the related records of book movement, exchange and use between others.[[94]](#footnote-94) This way of thinking about texts as the unconscious structure through which commonality was defined has not been without adaptation, with Jennifer Wynne Hellworth providing one of the most notable changes for the purpose of this chapter; in her work on the connections between birth, devotional and textual communities of women in Medieval and Early Modern England, Hellworth modified Stock’s textual community to take the gender of its inhabitants into account, ‘to be particular to women’s textual practices’. She further judges that such female textual communities, alongside other communal networks, were essential ‘[in the] production and dissemination of knowledge’.[[95]](#footnote-95) Communities involving women religious so often relate back to the texts which define and connect them.

The communal textual networks created by book exchange, as illustrated in the case of Dartford’s secular-to-monastic *Stimulus amoris,* are one of the most advanced areas of scholarship regarding the period. At the forefront of such historiography is Mary C. Erler, who has written extensively on the secular and religious dimensions of female-to-female textual exchange. In arguing for a changing emphasis of book requests in the fifteenth century alongside the rise of a new female lay readership, she asserted both lay and religious commonality through an intellectual currency: there became ‘a synthesis of this vernacular audience with that of religious women, their common interest being devotional reading.’[[96]](#footnote-96) For her, the ‘permeability’ of the female religious culture between the enclosed and worldly is ‘a study of female affiliation’, as ‘the act of reading … [allowed] women [to make] connections among themselves.’[[97]](#footnote-97) John B. Friedman, in a study of Northern English book ownership and transmission, supported this argument, suggesting that English women ‘were often directly involved in the promotion of reading for other women,’ as Susan Bell asserted with regards to their Continental sisters.[[98]](#footnote-98) Friedman emphasised the strong possibilities of book exchange and gifting as demonstrative of female choice, imagination and the value they placed on art and aesthetics.[[99]](#footnote-99) Such intangible connections, alongside the networks of physical exchange created, support the idea of female communities built on shared texts and their readings. For the inhabitants of Dartford Priory, Cistercian houses of Yorkshire and Syon Abbey, the communities that they belonged to and asserted themselves through is evident in their textual exchange leading up to the sixteenth century.

Yet it was more than the physicality of the books and their practical movement between nunneries and secular contemporaries that built community between them: the nature of the spiritual works they contained placed these owners and readers within a devotional community of shared piety and with guidance for engagement with their lay community. Often mystical, contemplative and frequently repetitive in nature, the texts disseminated throughout and involving this work’s three case studies was demonstrative of nation-wide understandings of Christian devotion and through this, influenced the convent’s engagement within their local community. The idea of a ‘devotional community’ of religious and laity in late medieval England has theoretical routes in, firstly, explorations of the pre-mentioned textual community and secondly, in the scholarship of national, pre-Reformation religious character.

The repetition of the works and messages of certain spiritual figures within texts held across the country points immediately to the popularity of a shared, mystic spirituality in the laity, encouraged and perpetuated by textual exchange and shared involvement with the religious. It was works regarding the likes of Catherine of Siena and Walter Hilton, ‘those saints who integrated monastic spirituality and the lay life [that] were amongst the most popular with women.’[[100]](#footnote-100) Alexandra Barrett traced the ‘considerable influence’ of these visionary texts in ‘the sad case of Elizabeth Barton’, a sixteenth-century servant whose visionary career was schooled through convent texts and whose mystically-inspired political involvement led to her execution for treason.[[101]](#footnote-101) E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham asserted that the Syon Abbey reflected the fifteenth-century flowering of mysticism, inner contemplation and Christ- and Marian-centric devotion in England outside as well as inside the cloister; it assumed a ‘manifestation of an intense interior quest for union with God which preoccupied many pious men and women.’[[102]](#footnote-102)

Catherine Sanok further argued for the construction of a ‘feminine community’ based on (particularly vernacular) texts, defined through a ‘collective female response [to] saints’ lives.’[[103]](#footnote-103) The popularity of texts regarding saints and religious works, regardless of their monastic origins or aims, crossed enclosed boundaries; these textual communities were demonstrative of a wide, shared culture of devotion. Nancy Barren Warren summed up these united aspects of gendered and textual late medieval devotion when she argued that the internalised, compassion-centred spirituality of women illustrated in their reading informed their communal religiosity in a serious and fundamental way: ‘In female medieval spirituality, the “*corpus* of all individuals” does matter intensely.’ [[104]](#footnote-104)

Building from this ‘body of individuals’ understanding, this study suggests that this culture of piety goes further, that it is a nation-wide community of devotion cemented through monastic centres, that is so often overlooked in the historiography of national devotion. A definition of the term is, correspondingly, hard to come by. Maria Craciun and Elaine Fulton, in their introduction to an edited volume addressing reform, monasticism and society in eastern European areas between the late medieval period and the turn of the nineteenth century, addressed the scholarly gaps in tackling what they too call ‘communities of devotion’:

‘Much, however, remains unknown, with still limited scholarly coverage of the role played by religious orders in the formation and implementation of reforms within the Church, particularly in the context of Catholic renewal […] This dovetails with a curious scarcity of literature dedicated to a general assessment of the activities and role of religious orders, despite the publication of histories of individual orders or national surveys concerning their activities […] Another dominant tendency has been to explore the later Middle Ages and the Early Modern period as two completely separate worlds.’[[105]](#footnote-105)

They go on to suggest the prominence of Western Europe regarding these studies has dramatically limited scholarly attention elsewhere; a similar case can certainly be made regarding England to the continent, as the introduction to this work addressed, when regarding the difficulties that remain from historiographical periodisation.[[106]](#footnote-106) They regard the relationship between religious orders and the world in which they operated as a ‘community of devotion’, stating that such a term should be applied ‘to the interaction and intersections between’ the world and the cloister in ‘porous… boundaries… to the extent that one is barely comprehensible without the other.’[[107]](#footnote-107)

Despite the geographical differences in study, Barry Collett suggested similar ideas for future study in the religiosity of Tudor England: ‘[that] research will reveal much more common ground between the religious life and the lay life,’ through examining the relationships of individual to God, saints and the contact points between heaven and earth.[[108]](#footnote-108) Lastly, Martial Staub concluded a study on self-representation in British Medieval religious communities by saying that the religious life provided society with a ‘strong orientation point’, as he addressed the importance in scholarly understanding of ‘changing definitions in… their legitimatory function’ in local contexts.[[109]](#footnote-109) His suggestion that the contemporary ideal of enclosure as completely removed from the world was the result of the understanding of monasticism as ‘the ultimate manifestation of human responsibility’, corresponds with ideas of ‘praying for the world’ (especially related to nuns and convent life) within cloisters as being hugely important for the religious health across society.[[110]](#footnote-110)

The place of monasticism within a pious, English ‘body of individuals’ informs and is informed by *both* this withdrawn, spiritual understanding and practical, pious engagement with the laity. It is precisely these religious centres – particularly of women – that assert and bring together pious cultures into similar and shared communities and therefore, into a single, national community of devotion. If, as David Warren Sabean suggested, ‘what is common in community is not shared values or common understanding, so much as the fact that members of a community are engaged in the same argument’, a national community of devotion can be established through religious centres, with the laity practically engaged in a shared spiritual argument.[[111]](#footnote-111) It is through texts that communities of devotional are formed and further inspired.

It is the nature and depth of this commitment to both devotional and practical communities through texts that this chapter will principally address. Through a case-by-case examination of Dartford Priory, the Yorkshire Cistercians and Syon Abbey, this chapter will elucidate the connections between the texts owned, commissioned and given to women religious within both their practical communities and their role within devotional ones. Their engagement with the secular world and surrounding laity will be investigated through the content of the texts and their practical context of commissioning and ownership. Legal cases, pastoral rules and testamentary evidence will be used to further support this textually-based worldly involvement.

On a spiritual level, this chapter will use the textual remains of these houses to assess their religious characters and how the texts themselves formed and informed community feeling and female religious piety. Enhanced by the supporting evidence of the adoption of relics and understandings of sites of pilgrimage, the place of each case-study within a broad community of devotion will be assessed, unearthing similarities between houses of different regions, economic situations and across order-ed lines through their piety, maintained and created through texts. Lastly, and more implicitly, this chapter will assess the forming and informing impacts of texts upon their monastic communities; through both encouraging practical engagement and inspiring pious understandings, texts were an essential and fundamental aspect of internal monastic community, informing and maintaining the non-physical but key boundaries of female religious character.

The mixed histories and content of the *Stimulus amoris* was far from unique for late medieval devotional manuscripts. Indeed, it is the purpose of this chapter to show that similar texts held by female religious were not only demonstrative of the make-up of devotional reading material, but that these examples infer far greater associations and implications between and around the lives of fifteenth-century English convents. It was communal engagement provoked and supported by their devotion, as their social and functional lives mirrored the religious advice they held, and spiritual character they both understood and fulfilled.

*Case Study 1: Dartford Priory.*

Like MS Harley 2254, before its inclusion into the Dominican library, MS Douce 322 had a secular life. On an inserted folio before the contents page, an inscription is included that asserts a lay relationship with the work:

These booke in whome is content dyver devoute tretis and specially the tretis that is called ars mordeni ys of the gifte of Wylliam Baron Esquyer to remayne for evyr to the place and nonrye of detforde and specially to the use of dame pernelle warttisley sister of the same place by licence of her abbas the whiche pernelle is nece to the for seyde gentylman William Baron.[[112]](#footnote-112)

The contents page that follows lays out in the clearest of ways the volume’s devotional emphasis, ranging from the simplest and most necessary of Christian thought to a firm emphasis on the anti-worldly and the concept of spiritual internalisation.[[113]](#footnote-113)

Before the relevance of such content to Dartford and its communities can be discussed, the secular provenance of the book, and the subsequent importance of this to the book’s readership within Dartford and externally, should be addressed. Through A. I. Doyle’s definitive study and Paul Lee’s extensive analysis of MS Douce 322, the lay history of the document is well-known and well-researched. Donated to Dame Parnel by her grandfather William Baron, and given to the Priory no later than the last decade of the fifteenth century, it is understood that the manuscript was compiled around 1475 in a professional scriptorium; the inclusion of various sources within a single volume and Doyle’s dating of the single-handed script around the mid-to-later fifteenth century provide evidence for this assertion.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Whether Baron had the work commissioned specifically for his granddaughter and her Dartford sisters, or if he passed it to her later in his life, remain contentious issues for Lee. The contents chime so exactly with Dominican spirituality, suggesting that a main motivation in making the text was to fit within the known reading taste of the convent. However, the inclusion of Baron’s armorial shields on folios 10 and 78, and what appears to be the secondary inclusion of a donation inscription, point to his ownership and use well before.[[115]](#footnote-115) Yet, as Doyle goes on to argue, the style and content in the manuscript ‘might have been produced for someone of substance and influence in the metropolitan milieu, both secular and religious, with devout well-to-do women in mind.’[[116]](#footnote-116) Given Lee’s own findings that, whilst most Dartford sisters were probably not of high birth (the fact that their identities were not recorded suggests as much), and only two fifteenth-century prioresses were aristocratic, the majority of prioresses were probably from gentry families aligns with Doyle’s suggestion of ‘well-to-do women.’[[117]](#footnote-117)

The insertion of the granting inscription to Parnel, presumably post-completion, may remain problematic, but is not sufficient evidence in itself to suggest that it was not Baron’s specific intention to gift it. Similarly, the inclusion of armorial shields could imply, as Lee suggested regarding the arms featured in the opening folio of MS Harley 2254, that they ‘were included as remembrance of his gift.’[[118]](#footnote-118) Yet whichever possibility reveals the precise reason for MS Douce 322’s commission, the physical and spiritual connections of laity and religious, found in its contents and history, are demonstrative of an inclusive, communally-minded engagement with religiosity over both lay and monastic lines through text. The physical exchange of the text and its content – its place within a network of cross-generational family structure and, arguably, the reason for its existence – informed the priory of Dartford’s practical engagement with the outside laity as well as illuminated the popular devotional understandings of female religious.

The choice and inclusion of particular works within this manuscript naturally explains much about the devotional community in which Dartford was a member, and it was not simply the devotional understandings of all female religious that it elucidated; the piety asserted within the text appears to chime solidly with Dominican ideals. MS Douce 322 focuses primarily on three aspects: the importance and joys of the contemplative life over the more base pleasures of the world, the encouragement of the process of spiritual internalisation, and, importantly, the significance of a ‘good’ death. Four chapters in this manuscript are devoted in turn to how ‘we shull lerne to dye’, how one should regard ‘the crafte of Dying’, and the ‘gostly batayle’ one must overcome to reach ‘whyche ladder men move [up]… to heven.’[[119]](#footnote-119) Work within the *ars moriendi* (the art of dying) genre had grown popular during the latter half of the fourteenth century, resulting and encouraged by the ravages of the Black Death. Each work ‘shared the goal of alleviating the suffering of those who were preparing to die… [suggesting] how best to face [their] most common fears.’[[120]](#footnote-120) The Dominicans were an order particularly committed to the theological importance of ‘dying well’, and it was one of their most famous fourteenth-century writers, Henry Suso, whose ‘Crafte of Dying’ work was not only be replicated in Baron’s text commission (as chapter five within the manuscript), but was widely circulated and popular amongst the libraries of English Carthusians, Benedictines and, crucially, Bridgettines and Dominicans.[[121]](#footnote-121)

A further extract within MS Douce 322 regarding *ars moriendi* is a translation of the *Somme Le Roy*, a late thirteenth-century French text that was one of seven English renditions.[[122]](#footnote-122) The fact that William Baron obviously found the extracts of the *ars moriendi* genre to be so important that he specifically included it in the introductory inscription of the book, at the expense of everything else contained, is telling in itself. As Lee suggests, ‘death, sin and the destination of the soul are common preoccupations of late medieval religious texts.’ [[123]](#footnote-123) It is clear that through study of this manuscript, its enclosed female readers not only engaged with their own fears of mortality and their afterlife, but had their own understandings of Dominican identity solidified through it. Furthermore, through the study of these texts, they were engaged within a huge aspect of late medieval faith, where the priorities invoked were at their most basic, most all-encompassing and most of all, most innately human. Texts such as MS Douce 322, then, connected their readers within a nation-wide, unconscious but spiritually imperative devotional community.

Art historian Enrico De Pascale elucidated that a common and helpful approach in the theory of *ars moriendi* was to evoke the sufferings of Christ both on the eve of and in his death, providing comfort as well as a model of guidance to the readers of such texts.[[124]](#footnote-124) This internalisation of Christ’s Passion characterised late medieval European devotional literature and art, eliciting feelings of empathy through affective meditation on the Passion and Christ’s sufferings. Readers saw through ‘richly emotional, script-like texts that ask their readers to imagine themselves present at scenes of Christ’s suffering and to perform compassion for that suffering victim in a private drama of the heart.’[[125]](#footnote-125) The importance of Christ’s blood, and the suffering it represented, came to feature heavily in such works, with Sarah McNamer being one of the latest historians to discuss its relevance as a symbol and in a more literal understanding in her emotion-centred work *Affective Mediation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*.[[126]](#footnote-126) It was in the first devotional treatise of MS Douce 322, the *Canticus amoris* (following from the opening calendar of the Christian year) that this preoccupation was seriously asserted, lyrically pronouncing the pain and bloody nature of crucifixion in short, rhyming and, crucially, memorable stanzas:

…he faught for me / Wounded he was and bytterly bledde / Hys precious blode full grete plede / Ful pituously for me he shedde / Hys sydes full blo and blody were / That somtyme were ful bright of ble / Hys hert was pershed with a spere…[[127]](#footnote-127)

The vast popularity of such imagery is, of course, only enough to suggest Dartford’s female religious as having an understanding of the common spiritual themes of the era. Even the mirroring passages of inward-looking devotion contained within MS Harley 2254’s *Prickynge of Love* only go so far as to imply evidence of active engagement within what this study considers to be a devotional community. Yet within passages of the *Prickynge of Love* regarding Christ’s Passion, the modern reader can see the most physical of evidences that can be gained from the reading of late medieval texts. Underlined within the book, certain phrases singled out have clear connections with, and offer support of, the theories of internalised piety and meditation on empathy with Christ:

[…take to my synne but thyn owne blood for seynt poule seyth] with outen blood no thynge may be made clene. [And I desire aftir no thynge but aftir clennesse of my soule] … [as seynt poule sayeth Thee blood of criste] shal clense oure consciences fro werkis of deth. … [that I myghte seie with felynge of herte with the apostel thus] For beden be to me al ioynge but in the crosse of oure lord Ihu criste.[[128]](#footnote-128)

On a straight-forward, reader-level basis, the words could not fail to have been noted by the women religious readers, and seen alongside the sentiments echoing the quite literal suggestion that one should turn into oneself to find God (‘that I myghte seie…’), the links of contemplative spirituality within the Dominican female house are distinctly developed. Yet it is possible to suggest even further that this displays evidence of external commitment with the same devotional community; the underlining was performed in the same ink of the scribal copier, suggesting that such phrases were considered important to their lay readers even before the book arrived in Dartford’s library.[[129]](#footnote-129) If, as Friedman suggests, ‘Medieval books were repositories of all that people considered important’, Mss Douce 322 and Harley 2254 were demonstrative of the spiritual character of Dartford’s women religious.[[130]](#footnote-130) These texts validate the existence of a shared spirituality between the world outside and the enclosed women, providing the clear implication of a communal-based, if not communally-central, religiosity.

Such internally-devoted ideas confirm their place within European Dominican spirituality, ‘belonging as they did to an order whose nuns on the continent were associated with mystic spirituality, [in possession of] connections with the Carthusians and Bridgettines.’[[131]](#footnote-131) Furthermore, it can be strongly suggested that the spiritual character of both manuscripts was deeply affected by the lay audiences around them: MS Harley 2254 was made for the use *of* a secular audience, and though the original intentions for MS Douce 322 are debateable, it is beyond question that the book was meant to be gifted intentionally to the Priory at some stage from a lay patron. The secular community surrounding Dartford not only engaged with the spiritual community of both religious and fellow laity, but actually, actively, encouraged and developed it.

The bonds of Dartford’s internal community were further formulated through reading, and the education necessary to do so. With their Dominican reputation founded as friars who were both educated and educators, it is perhaps not a great surprise to find one of the main connections in Dartford’s internal religious community was that of learning.[[132]](#footnote-132) In Registers of the Dominican Masters-General from 1481, Sister Jane Fitzh’er, noted particularly as *nobilis et generosa*, is granted ‘a preceptor in grammar and the Latin tongue, and [that] he [her teacher] may enter the common *locutorium* (speak-room).’[[133]](#footnote-133) Presumably enlisting the tuition of a monk from the corresponding Dominican male house, the rule went on to imply that, while it appears Sister Jane herself made the request, it was not an appeal purely for herself; in granting that ‘Also she and other gentlewomen may be called to learn’, the picture of education for the women religious community of Dartford appears remarkably open and inclusive.[[134]](#footnote-134) Yet such rules are no guarantee of the time at which the practice began, only of its legitimisation from above. The classes undertaken by Sister Jane must have lasted well into the sixteenth century, if not right up until the Dissolution; Paul Lee quotes from a manuscript detailing the history of St Monica’s convent in Louvain, founded over a century after Jane Fitzh’er’s appeal had been accepted, that the elderly nun Margaret Clement had had, after being professed in 1519, ‘the Education of Sister Elizabeth Woodford, an English religious of the Monastery of Dartford.’[[135]](#footnote-135) The engagement with and support for education, and the texts encouraging and necessary for doing so, obviously had long-term associations for the women of Dartford, joining their internal community in a way both suggestive of male Dominican tradition, and, seemingly, exceptionally characteristic of their specific religious house.

The consideration of Dartford’s literary content as a whole provides further evidence not only of purely contemplative reading, but of encouraging the nun’s engagement with practical, pastoral and social elements inside and outside their insular religious selves. Lee has argued convincingly that the joining of *Prickynge of Love* with the *Mixed Life* in *Stimulus amoris* suggests a certain anxiety of late medieval religious corresponding to their ‘inability to combine the carrying out of worldly responsibilities at the same time as undertaking a demanding spiritual discipline.’[[136]](#footnote-136) The two works are not entirely separate, nor do they contradict each other (Hilton upholds the contemplative life with the upmost importance, with Richard Rolle-esque statements about Christ within one’s soul), but *Mixed Life* adds a dimension of worldly engagement to the work that, presumably for an house belonging to an order of Friars famed for their place in secular society, had been both valuable and necessary.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Reflection on the content of MS Douce 322 also suggests a strongly pastoral sensibility for its readers; ranging from the most simplistic of Christian treaties (the description of the seven deadly sins in chapter five), through the education of the most emphatically anti-worldly (‘Chaptires made by Richard Hampoll Heremyte howe a man shulde lyve in contemplacione in meditacion and in other virtuous lyvyng’) and the focus on Christ’s love and sacrifice in the *Canticus amoris*, to the *ars moriendi* texts, it is possible to see this manuscript as appealing to nuns whatever their spiritual life stage.[[138]](#footnote-138) For women just professed, the importance of basic piety and the elucidation of the joys of enclosed life must have been imperative in the formation of their careers. The involved and sophisticated engagement with contemplative texts further confirms and reinforces their religious selves, offering solace and comfort during their enclosure and towards the end of their lives. Textual aids to the religious life, such as MS Douce 322, therefore, both confirm texts as central to the everyday lives of women religious, but also go implicitly further; such texts lie at the very heart of their religious experience, forming and informing their spiritual journeys and identities. In this way, texts that provide Dominican pastoral care and spiritual guidance inform their communities, creating boundaries of similarity through shared reading and spiritual association.

Evidence of the external lives of women of Dartford, like the vast majority of all English religious houses, is undeniably scarce, as previously suggested in the introduction of this work. Taking into account the methodological issues relating to such potentially-unrepresentative sources, however, there still remains, in what little records we have access to, a glimpse into the secular engagement of these Dominican women in the community around their convent. The evidence from the last quarter of the fifteenth century in particular demonstrates Prioresses acting with autonomy outside Dartford’s monastery walls, with the rules confirming the appropriateness or rightness of factors seemingly passed retrospectively. In the Registers of the Dominican Masters-General in this twenty-five year period, nearly all recorded rules deal with the relationships the sisters of Dartford had with the outside world: the license to give alms was granted to Prioress Beatrice in 1474 and interestingly, her ability to ‘dispose of, and dispense within the order, the goods conceded to her use by the order’, granted in the same register entry, supports the idea that the ‘alms’ must have been external, through the distinguishing of the first internal rule.[[139]](#footnote-139)

Statements were also made that allowed a greater freedom of communication and interaction between the sisters with their monastic brothers and the laity. The announcements that ‘servants and workmen may enter the monastery without detriment of fame or honour’ and that ‘Sister Jane Tyrellis may talk in the common speak-place with friends of honourable fame, without a companion’, suggest that Dartford was intimately linked to the outside world through friends and family, forming a place engaged with, importantly, external business.[[140]](#footnote-140) This was supported in the opening years of the sixteenth century, with ‘Sister Giana [Jane?]... [allowed] to speak at the grill with relatives and friends being persons of no blame’, and with the appointment of Master Nicholas Stremer as principal of Masters-General, the convent ‘may allow blameless [unprofessed] women to enter the convent… according to custom’.[[141]](#footnote-141) Furthermore, and further back, the accounts of Thomas of Lancaster reveal that between 1418-1421, there are entries relating the amount paid to Dartford in return for the board of his two young stepdaughters, at least sixty years before the Masters-General legitimised such behaviour.[[142]](#footnote-142) Though this rule of 1481 was revoked in uncompromising language only a couple of years later (yet subsequently altered back within two decades), it implies the legitimisation within the order of a practice enacted by the Dartford house previously, and continues to suggest a place welcoming to its community, and a community enthusiastic and encouraged to go.[[143]](#footnote-143)

Between MSS Harley 2254 and Douce 322 and the limited but important fifteenth-century references to this Dominican Priory, there is evidence to suggest a convent well engaged with and frequently engaging within the spiritual and practical communities of its time through and involving the texts they shared. Through the content of its pious reading material, Dartford was an exemplar of the internalised, contemplative, compassion-focused spirituality of the age. The secular origins of these books suggest not only a closeness with their surrounding lay community but a further intimacy of spiritual feeling. Both placed them and their benefactors in a devotional community prominent across England and also found throughout Europe. The practical uses of the textual content and the evidence from secular sources further an encouraging idea of Dartford as central to lay life, providing shelter, charity and education within their local community, supported by the traditional character of their Dominican order. All were created and reinforced through their reading.

*Case Study 2: The Yorkshire Cistercians.*

The contents of the libraries for Cistercian women religious in Yorkshire remains, sadly, almost entirely unknown.[[144]](#footnote-144) David N. Bell traced only three texts that survive for the region, with a handful of other texts being referenced in contemporary wills. The material that does remain, however, proposes a heavy investment in the same devotional community of shared devotion and patronage that the Dartford Priory case-study suggested. The remaining Hampole Priory manuscript focuses on the Passion, Marian devotion and, suggesting a spiritual association with their Dartford contemporaries, the Office of the Dead. [[145]](#footnote-145) The manuscript also contains a dedication to the nunnery from Isabel de Vernon, a woman who Bell suggested was potentially a member of a prominent land-holding family. For Swine Priory, two spiritual texts that once belonged to the nuns are recorded to still exist; the first, featuring an English Life of St Catherine of Siena and the *Fervor amoris*, a text displaying ‘aspects of contemporary vernacular contemplative theory (particularly that of Rolle and Hilton)’, bears the inscription ‘Be yt remembered that dame Mald Wade, priorys of Swyne, has given this boke to dame Joan Hyltoft in Nuncotom.’[[146]](#footnote-146) These aspects of female textual gifting, of lay patronage within the histories of the texts, and the specifically compassion-centric piety that they contain suggest houses connected and engaged within a broad devotional community, created and instilled through text.

Yet it is MS 18, now belonging to King’s College, Cambridge, which most fully demonstrates the creation of the devotional community through texts in the sparse remaining Cistercian sources.[[147]](#footnote-147) The *Ambrosius* manuscript came to Swine Priory in the first half of the fifteenth century, probably from an Augustinian priory at Shulbrede, Sussex.[[148]](#footnote-148) Though it remains one of our only glimpses into the textual collections of the women religious of Cistercian Yorkshire, the work itself, alongside the brief pieces of fifteenth-century evidence from other houses, allows an essential insight into the devotional and practical worlds of the county’s Cistercian nuns. As Claire Cross, one of the most renowned historians of the late medieval female religious in Yorkshire, asserted, ‘the spirituality of Yorkshire women in the sixteenth century might seem a very elusive subject, but in fact, the historical sources… yield a considerable amount of evidence.’ In her study of the life and work of Mechtild of Hackeborn and their inclusions into so many late medieval English pious books, Rosalynn Voaden uses the *Ambrosius* manuscript to demonstrate the ‘tendency of Mechtild’s works to travel in convoy with those of Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden, and other Syon favourites.’[[149]](#footnote-149) It was at the back of the manuscript, on fol. 104v., that a list of twelve books donated to Swine Priory included these ‘favourites’, given to them by their vicar.[[150]](#footnote-150) The proximity of this spiritual devotion that the famous Abbey shared with Hampole, Swine and their regional contemporaries, through these scarce but important examples, is illustrative of the Yorkshire Cistercians’ engagement within a broad devotional and practical community.

The donation page of the *Ambrosius* manuscript, severely stained and practically illegible without the aid of modern ultra-violet light photography, contains a life of Mechtild and the *Revelations* of Bridget of Sweden. It was written by a hand dated by Bell as late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.[[151]](#footnote-151) It also travelled in tandem with works that included a historical narrative of the Bible (Peter Comestor’s hugely influential, educational and often vernacular translated *Historia scolastica*), a theological and canon law manual aiming to provide a ‘practical guide for the cure of souls’ (parish priest William of Paull’s ‘standard authority on pastoral office’, the *Oculus sacerdotis*) and the *Sermones de tempore*, James of Voragine’s Dominican sermons that were widely both disseminated and translated throughout Europe.[[152]](#footnote-152) Immediately, the textual community of Swine Priory is evident, despite the fact that these works only survive in these brief references. Featuring renowned and popular works of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the emphasis of this travelling collection is firmly on the spiritual education of its readers; the likelihood of some of these works being in the vernacular, given the remaining copies of the contemporaries, is high (though King’s College MS 18 is in Latin throughout).[[153]](#footnote-153) When seen in conjunction with each other, the works point to an engaged and complimentary system of religious instruction that has much in common with the most basic of spirituality at Syon and Dartford.

The inclusion of Bridget of Sweden is perhaps unsurprisingly related strongly to the only convent of her order in England, but it is Mechtild of Hackeborn in this literary assortment, as Voaden asserted, that is especially interesting in terms of the reception of her visionary works. A work that is both ‘spiritually orthodox and aesthetically pleasing,’ featuring vivid and compelling descriptions of her visions, Voaden suggests that it is ‘easy to appreciate why [Mechtild’s *Liber*] was widely disseminated and well received.’[[154]](#footnote-154) The amount of copies related to and found within Syon’s library, and the fact that it was not until the end of the first quarter of the fifteenth century that there is evidence for the *Liber*’s presence in England at all, correspond almost exactly to Syon’s foundation and initial development. It firmly suggests the Abbey’s strong involvement with the dissemination of this visionary work. When seen in light of Syon’s famously vigorous and forward-thinking religiosity, the Swine collection reported in King’s College MS 18 appears to mirror some of their most important spiritual aims and ideals. By engaging with these famous works by female visionaries of the late medieval period, and by understanding the pastoral elements so fully championed, there remains the strong implication that despite geographical distance and economic disparity, Swine was very much a part of the popular community of devotion across the country.

The practical, everyday involvement of the text in the lives and piety of Cistercian women religious, however, is harder to prove; it cannot be implied through connections and similarities to other texts in other houses. Given that the *Ambrosius* manuscript is one of only three pieces of textual evidence of the Yorkshire Cistercian’s female religious to survive, it remains even more difficult to gain insight into how the books were used, what they were used for, and with what frequency. It is a strong indicator of the spiritual community and reading culture of Swine, (and its county-wide, order-contemporaries), that *Ambrosius* features repeated and curious annotations alongside the Latin script. From the very first page, annotations suggest how the work has been interpreted; at the bottom of the left-hand column, a short passage asserting the importance of teaching (‘*officii docendi*’) is underlined and bracketed, accompanied by a small drawing of what appears to be a key.[[155]](#footnote-155) On the preceding page, one of the many drawn hands throughout the book points to a statement extolling obedience and quiet virtue in its readers (‘*tacere quam loqui nolle difficilius est*’, or, ‘it is more difficult to be silent than to be unwilling to speak’).[[156]](#footnote-156) On fol. 15, a column is bracketed again, as if sectioned by the annotations of religious merits in the margin, including the qualities of *modestia* (modesty)*, sapientia* (wisdom) and *justicia* (being just).[[157]](#footnote-157)

Underlinings, annotations, brackets and pointed hands (as well as several doodles of faces, birds and in one strange case, on fol. 74, what appears to be the back-end of a horse) litter this work, so often drawing the reader’s attention to short statements regarding contemplative, quiet, thoroughly enclosed religion. Such extra information is key in judging the personal engagement with each text, and whilst we cannot say for certain that such markings were made by the nuns at Swine, the sections highlighted correspond to the wider virtues and religious understandings found within the works of the donation list. This suggests it was either the Cistercian women themselves or their spiritual advisors that issued these inscriptions. On a purely practical level too, the pictures and comments added to the book suggest an ease of reference and a frequency in reading the text, while the underlining of certain short, key terms must have served as an aid to memory. As in Dartford’s literary holdings, the informative and supportive links between practicalities of the monastery with its devotional understanding are well illustrated within the *Ambrosius* manuscript. It is a text that both suggests a key role within their wider devotional community through its content, and one that informs the religious character of those in the community, reinforcing and maintaining the pious commonality between convent members.

Yet though Swine Priory was, by some way, the richest of all its national contemporaries (valued at just over 82l, it was nearly ten pounds a year wealthier than the nearest, Nunappleton, and almost seventy pounds better off than the Yorkshire Cistercian’s poorest house, Handale) and arguably, the most well-known (one of the few convents in the region with the clout to appeal and be successful against the minor Suppression of 1536), to regard it as demonstrative of a broader trend of late medieval piety and practicality, more evidence is required.[[158]](#footnote-158) Sources detailing both this convent’s communication with the outside world and the sparse but essential information regarding the rest of the Yorkshire Cistercians must be assessed.

Papal appeals and grants from the late fifteenth century reveal one of the most practical uses for these convents: regarding the profession of illegitimate girls, the appeals for pardon allow them not only to enter the convent, providing them with shelter and protection, but the ability to become Prioress. Through these successful applications, these girls were granted a career. The early sixteenth-century case of Cecily Topcliff of Kirklees Priory is one of the clearest worded examples of such a case, in the records of the confirmation of her election by the vicar general and arch deacon of York; the validity of her appointment is not only justified through her lawful age and reputation (‘goodness of morals and knowledge of letters’) but because she ‘hast had a sufficient dispensation from the apostolic see in the matter of legitimacy.’[[159]](#footnote-159) The legal records referencing the Yorkshire Cistercian houses furthermore place them at the centre of a financial local community. The amount of cases addressing unpaid debts to the convents suggest their alms-giving extended further than charity and into worldly money-lending, whilst others note non-payments or deferrals in rents and rental agreements.[[160]](#footnote-160) The Cistercian nunneries of this county appear to have been heavily involved in the economic lives of those around them, engaged in a financially dependent relationship with the laity.

While most evidence of the Yorkshire female Cistercians comes from the sixteenth century, it implies and references a great deal about the practical and religious lives of the female inhabitants from decades before. Both elements of their enclosed and outward lives intersect, with evidence of religiosity corresponding and supporting the measures adopted in the secular lives around them through texts. The 1536 visitations records of Layton and Leigh record a selection of the ‘superstitions’ of these houses, demonstrating what appears to be the long-term religious focus of the female houses.[[161]](#footnote-161) These records reveal both Basedale and Sinningthwaite as holding relics that must have brought them at least some local fame; the former possessing the Virgin’s milk, one of the most popular relics of late medieval English monasticism, and the latter the arm of St Margaret. Both nunneries, despite their relatively tiny economic size, not only engaged with overwhelming trends of piety generally, but involved themselves with very specific, female-centric icons.

The milk-relic corresponds within the compassion-focused, Marian-centric ideal of late medieval piety; particularly embraced by the Cistercians as an order, the Virgin’s image was re-founded within the art of *pietas* and the corresponding Man of Sorrows imagery, and mirrored in the internalised *ars moriendi*-esque rhetoric of the era. Miri Rubin traced the local origins of Mary’s breast milk as a relic in the reforming period of the sixteenth century, stating that, though ‘the “false milk” of Mary became emblematic of the type of relics that the reforming king was about to sweep away,’ it had previously been a ‘ubiquitous local affair’ that ‘remained for a while within reach of most English folk.’[[162]](#footnote-162) The inclusion of Bridget of Sweden’s *Revelations* in the donation list of books found within MS 18, the female saint so utterly devoted to the Virgin that her visions eventually transported her into the very Nativity itself, is further evidence of this Mary-based piety as a large part of enclosed religious life.[[163]](#footnote-163) The inclusion of the Hours of the Virgin in the Hampole manuscript is added evidence of the importance of Marian devotion across the region. This idea that this Marian imagery connected the enclosed spirituality of the convent within not only a broad European vein of Cistercian piety but within the religious hearts and minds of the English laity is a crucial one in establishing the place of the female Yorkshire Cistercians within a wide and far-reaching devotional community.

Both relics that resided at Sinningthwaite were recorded in the mid-1530 visitation records as having a very specific purpose, a purpose that could not fail to situate their houses within their local community and infer the overlap of communal piety with community practicality: the relics belonging to St Margaret and St Bernard were believed ‘good for lying-in women.’[[164]](#footnote-164) St Margaret, a saint famed for her motherhood and secular life as queen of Scotland, might have seemed a comforting choice to pregnant lay women. The inclusion of this statement within the visitation records leads the modern reader to assume that not only was this belief of such importance that it was worth writing down (little detail remains about the beliefs held by many other Cistercian Yorkshire nunneries), but that, on a day-to-day basis, the lay community surrounding Sinningthwaite must have had trusted and engaged with the convent’s nuns in particularly vulnerable times. The use of these relics for ‘lying-in women’ further the idea of an interlinked understanding between piety and locality in late medieval England. The idea that nuns, in groups formed around the pursuit of virginity, were involved and have overlapping responsibilities to ‘birth communities’ suggests that the spirituality of the convent, formed through texts involving female saints involved in and who experienced birth and motherhood, is reflected within the community around them, and the community responds to and fits in with the devotional practice and understanding of their convent.[[165]](#footnote-165)

The visitation records of Leigh and Layton reveal one last crucial detail about the Yorkshire female Cistercians and their devotional and practical communities. In addressing the nunnery of Hampall (Hampole), the visitors record the nunnery’s ‘pilgrimage to Saint Richard, a saint not canonised.’[[166]](#footnote-166) They include such a reference, as Rubin suggested, ‘as part of the campaign that presented monasteries as centres of harmful and deceitful superstition.’[[167]](#footnote-167) Yet in suggesting that the nuns of Hampole still honoured Richard Rolle almost two centuries after his death, a devotional writer that had made the convent his home, a hermit that coloured so vividly the contemplative spirituality of the late medieval period, a man so influential that his works can be found within all the greatest monastic libraries of the age (including, to a great extent, Dartford and Syon), Leigh and Layton unwittingly laid witness to a religious element that united the local with the national, the theological with the every-day, and the devotional community with the practical.

Given that Rolle was a spiritual director at Hampole until his death in 1349, Nicholas Watson suggested that, in view of the immediate and vast proliferation of the mystic’s work in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, ‘the seeds of his fame must have been sown during his life.’[[168]](#footnote-168) It was during his prolonged stay at the Cistercian convent that Rolle honed his ideals of ‘the lifting of the mind into God by contemplation’, and, by extension, it must be from this remote Yorkshire nunnery that Rolle’s influential writings were dispersed.[[169]](#footnote-169) Rolle’s influence was not merely felt in his extolling of the internalised life. Whilst he ‘never tires of stressing the logical incompatibility between full contemplative concentration and the constant demands of social service’, his vision of holiness and true Godliness is just slightly less straight-forward than first imagined.[[170]](#footnote-170) As Petry argues, ‘having inexorably put contemplation above any and all social claims, [Rolle] manifests charitable concern for others to no mean extent.’[[171]](#footnote-171)

This work is in no way as supportive of the mixed contemplative and practical life as Hilton’s work found in Dartford’s MS Harley 2254, but it nevertheless illustrates the intellectual and spiritual links between the responsibilities of those involved in internalised devotion with those in the outside world. The insinuation that inward-facing piety can and does lend itself to engaging with the concerns of and duties within the local community demonstrates exactly the spiritual character hinted at in the works of pastoral care written in King’s College MS 18’s donation list. Furthermore, this idea was practically demonstrated and found within the involvement in the spiritual and worldly lives of their women religious and the surrounding laity. For an order notorious in its removal from the world, the female Cistercians of late medieval Yorkshire were engaged with their immediate lay communities on the most every day of levels, as they reflected (and in terms of Hampole, embellished and refracted) the broad spiritual trends of the country.

*Case Study 3: Syon Abbey*.

From 1530, when a nun made her profession at Syon Abbey, she was given her own translation of the *Myroure of Oure Ladye*, ‘a discussion of Christ’s revelations to Bridget [of Sweden] on the importance of study.’[[172]](#footnote-172) In reading this vernacular edition in the initial stages of a religious career at one of the youngest yet most prestigious houses in the country, the novice absorbed both an individual religious identity and that of their convent. The book was a vernacular version of an earlier Latin liturgy spoken to their patron saint, texts of which were numerous and, naturally for a work that involves such important subjects, remained influential right into the sixteenth century. In a house contemporaneously defined not just by its extensive library collection or even by the content and quantity of its literary commissions, but most of all, through its wide and thorough engagement with the key figures in late medieval devotion, the reading of the *Myroure*, and before it, the Latin equivalent, was the beginning of a spiritual journey; the Bridget of Sweden text placed the individual nun within a community of nation-wide devotion, encompassing the lay and the enclosed.

In contrast to the sparse remains of the previous case studies, the remaining evidence for Syon Abbey offers nothing short of a wealth of internal literary and secular, practical sources throughout its short existence. The discrepancy in the sheer availability of material for English Medieval nunneries, with Syon being so heavily weighted against the gapping of others, goes some way to explaining the historiographical issues of addressing the most famous and most wealthy of all the era’s convents. Such isolationist scholarship, mentioned extensively in this work’s introduction, is perhaps at its most pronounced in the century of Syon’s foundation; the quickly-growing reputation of the Abbey within the first half of the fifteenth century cannot help but be judged as separate against entirely smaller, poorer and less prominent nunneries. Yet suggesting that it was instead a deeply influential leading light of female monastic piety is arguably too simplistic still - though in some areas (vernacular translation, the use of printing for their own use) it was, in others it was very much a part and an extension of what was already in place. To argue this does not undermine the distinctiveness of Syon, but rather places it within the context of late medieval religious life in England. In comparison, this Bridgettine Abbey was not, as the previous case studies sought to demonstrate, in a vacuum or by itself. The internal distribution of individual copies of the *Myroure*, alongside so much of Syon’s literary output, will be demonstrative of its conscious engagement with and active part of the deeply ingrained devotional community of its contemporaries.

The first works commissioned at Syon Abbey, in the immediate decades after its completion, defined the spiritual character of the female inhabitants and their relationships to each other, their piety and their religious home. Unsurprisingly, they asked for the two major works most essential to their rule to be issued to them, editions that proved necessary ‘for the community to understand their purpose and identity’, as Bridgettines, as nuns and as a unified group of women.[[173]](#footnote-173) The *Rewyll of Seynt Saueoure* and Latin edition of *Myroure of Oure Ladye* form the textual foundations of the convent through which the first female inhabitants could form a spiritual and physical collective; against a high number of older and more established female religious houses, Syon cultivated a feeling of moral, religious and cultural togetherness to create a monastic body unified in spirit and, by natural and formulated extension, in spirituality.[[174]](#footnote-174)

These initial commissions provided establishment for the internal community of Syon’s fifteenth-century women religious in a way that this work’s previous case studies, and the vast majority of English nunneries that such case studies represent, simply did not need. Both the Cistercians and the Dominican house were geographically and spiritually well established and historically centred by the time of Syon’s foundation; the Bridgettines, belonging to one of the youngest orders in Europe, needed to establish the historical authority as a community to secure the admittance of young women. The literary focus on their Augustinian-based rule (an authority so established it must surely have compensated) so early on in Syon’s existence suggest a determined effort to define the Abbey within a community broader than the English monastic culture that they perhaps had less experience of.

This focus on the togetherness of those undertaking the religious life was also repeated in the translated *Myroure* in the sixteenth century. Elizabeth Schirmer asserted that it provided not only an arguably more relatable edition in its translation (though others have suggested that the former’s Latin text was not as insurmountable to the reading talents of Syon’s inhabitants as Eileen Power first assumed in 1922), but that the importance of reading the Rule goes further than just gaining some knowledge of what it says about the order’s founder and history. She convincingly argued that it ‘offers detailed instructions on how the Office should be read’, and through that, it instructs the nun to engage with and develop their religious selves.[[175]](#footnote-175)

The spiritual necessity and benefits of nuns reading devotional texts were exalted already in the initial Rule, with Bridget’s piety placing heavy significance on reading as an essential aid for spiritual enhancement: her Revelations announce that the Virgin Mary, on being told of Bridget’s combined studying of grammar, praying and writing, asserts that ‘It is not fitting to give this up for manual labour,’ when moments before, she urges Bridget’s contemporaries to give ‘whatever is left over [from their household] to the needy friends of God.’[[176]](#footnote-176) This feature of the Rule, given the extreme stress on poverty within the rest of the work, has caused Ann Hutchinson to stress that it was a plainly ‘remarkable’ idea.[[177]](#footnote-177) Seen in terms of pastoral care, the emphasis placed on the reading of these texts suggests a strong element within Syon of spiritual education, almost by proxy: communal understanding of spirituality and self is conducted in reading, through the medium of books, and simultaneously, reading defines and enhances devotional knowledge as part of Syon and the order itself.[[178]](#footnote-178)

Judging from this highly devotionally-internalised structure of piety through textual material, it appears that Syon Abbey was removed from the external community of its locality. Indeed, Platt argued that nuns like the Bridgettines ‘who were both secluded and aristocratic to boot’ at first seem an ‘unlikely focus for popular esteem and affection.’[[179]](#footnote-179) Clark has further suggested that during the fifteenth century, monasteries made, and desperately needed to make, conscious and sustained efforts to ingratiate themselves with the spirituality of their secular community, and did so by ‘adapting’ their religious focus to suit their surrounding lay feeling.[[180]](#footnote-180) Yet Syon, and the other case-studies of this work, do not seem to have been part of this trend in terms of secular engagement. The stringent pious discipline characteristic of Syon, untouched by contemporary satire in part due to its youth, seems to have been inherited from the first spiritual advisors and Prioresses, men and women with reclusive, Benedictine heritages.[[181]](#footnote-181) Through the spirituality instilled then and later, Syon mirrored, participated in and influenced the spiritual and practical communities of the secular community around them.

The contents of Syon’s famous library, works that were so encouraged and ingrained within their Rule, read like something of a late medieval ‘who’s who’ of popular religious texts. They held copies of the lives of some of the most influential, Continental female mystics of the previous century (featuring several copies of Catherine of Siena, Elizabeth of Hungary and Mechtild of Hackeborn) alongside the contemporary and home-grown (extracts from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, whose visits to and relationship with the Abbey will be addressed below).[[182]](#footnote-182) Works by those almost entirely removed from the world such as Julian of Norwich were read in tandem with the more mixed world-view of Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*. The piety of Syon, when judged from its reading material, appears classic and symptomatic of its era within female religious circles.[[183]](#footnote-183)

Neither was reading this type of work a passive, if mindful activity: the first scribe nun at Syon, Swedish Anne Karlsdottir, is recorded to have copied two Richard Rolle manuscripts in the earliest years of the Abbey.[[184]](#footnote-184) Christ- and Marian-centric, heavily based on both contemplation devotion and encouraging of worldly education and instruction, and, crucially, hugely female-targeted, the works included and read at Syon suggest, as Grisé argued, that these ‘texts on how to lead a good Christian life’, defined their faith.[[185]](#footnote-185) What Voaden described as ‘Syon favourites’ became so through the encouragement of nuns on the eve of professing to equip themselves with pious texts, suggesting that the sheer amount of works that appeared in Syon’s library were mirrored in the reading habits, and by extension, the spirituality, of secular women *before* they entered enclosed life.[[186]](#footnote-186)

The contents of the library were further influenced and patronised by the royal and aristocratic networks surrounding Syon, with Lady Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII’s mother, being the most notable of several examples of pious lay women commissioning books from Syon to be read for themselves.[[187]](#footnote-187) Margaret, Duchess of Clarence, for example, the sister-in-law of Henry V, and the mother of the girls taking advantage of Dartford Priory’s hospitality in the early 1420s, gave the Abbey a bible and commissioned one of their brothers to write a Life of St Jerome for the convent.[[188]](#footnote-188) The small (presumably portable) bible, later to become MS Additional 4006, features a contents page, is split into clear chapter headings and features sticking-out labels throughout, suggesting the importance of the work within the Abbey through extenuating the ease of use for the sisters.[[189]](#footnote-189) Furthermore, this advances the communal connectivity not only between lay female readership and enclosed women, but throws further light on the connectedness between Dartford and Syon.

Communal links of spirituality, however, go even further, as the convent reinforced, encouraged and impacted upon the spirituality of their surrounding community. James Clark’s understanding of the close links between the monastic insular community with the local lay community point to integration, highlighting relationships that were mutually beneficial but predominantly led by the external laity. This meant that monasticism adapted to the demands of laity.[[190]](#footnote-190) Yet for the women of Syon Abbey, it appears that their saint-based and compassion-centric piety not only chimed with public sentiment, but it actively promoted and encouraged it; it was less integration and more information. Syon’s reputation as a place of special holiness grew dramatically during the later fifteenth century, not only reinforcing the close communal bonds Syon’s popular spirituality was building with the laity, but also drawing pious travellers from a geographically-wider area; it impacted upon and inspired the piety of the surrendering laity (and those further afield). The ‘Pardon of Syon’ was one such reason to make the journey: described by John Audelay in his 1420s poem *Salutation to St Bridget* (the early date further suggesting this near-immediate growth in spiritual fame and renown), as a place ‘Beside the Chene [Syon’s brother house of Sheen], sothly, seven myle fro Lundun, / Our gracious Kyng Herré the V wes founder… / Haile, he let prevelege that hole place and called hit Bregit Sion’, it was here that the Pope granted ‘To al here pilgrims an Lammes Day / And also Myd-Lentyn Sunday / This pardon to last foreyever and ay. / God graunt us part of hit.’[[191]](#footnote-191)

J. T. Rhodes argued that the buying of rosary beads was a popular practice at Syon for their pilgrims, as was purchasing newly-formed relic-mirrors (‘thought to encapsulate some of the radiated grace [of a relic] and retain it for future use’), reflecting other major pilgrim centres across the continent.[[192]](#footnote-192) The benefits of such measures were two-fold: though unconsciously, Syon’s attractive spiritual reputation could not fail to increase trade, footfall and subsequent wealth in the immediate local area but also, in creating a tangible religious presence in the lives of travellers far from the Abbey, this Bridgettine house corresponded in the daily devotional lives of those no-where near its proximity. The spirituality of the Abbey mirrored and impacted upon popular religiosity, but also brought in economic benefits to close laity, and thus, the inhabitants of Syon were an active, informing member of the wider community, consciously and otherwise.

A penitent Margery Kempe was one such visitor, as recorded in her Book:

‘Fro London sche went to Schene [corrected in margins to Syon] a iii days beforn Lammes Day, for to purchasyn hir pardon thorw the mercy of owr Lord. And whan sche was in the chirch at Schene, sche had gret deovcyon and ful hy contemplacyon.’[[193]](#footnote-193)

Margery’s devotion to Bridget of Sweden was a marked feature of her piety, as the Englishwoman felt connected through their shared motherhood, their secular lives and their shared commitment to the Virgin Mary. It was her first port of pilgrimage after a spiritually-important trip through Europe, and from her characteristically emphatic response, the contemplative religiosity of the Abbey moved her profoundly:

‘Sche had pentivows teerys of compunccyon and of compassion, in the rememorawns of the bittyr peynys and passions which owr mercifcul Lord Jhesu Crist suffyrf in hys bliddyf manhod.’[[194]](#footnote-194)

In 1501, one of the most prominent printers of the age, Wynkyn de Worde, published an extract from Margery’s *Book*, prefixed with a caption that presented it in a completely new light. Rather than the original, which had taken the form of an autobiography detailing Margery’s daily life, childhood and marriage, this work was a series of internalised devotional exercises: ‘a shorte treatyse of contemplacyon taught by our lorde… or taken out of the boke of Margerie kempe of lynn.’[[195]](#footnote-195) It was this work that appeared in Syon’s library, printed at the very turn of the sixteenth century, by their favoured printer.

When this abridged version of Kempe’s work is studied alongside this convent, it reveals more about Syon’s place within communities of devotion across enclosed and worldly lines. Foster suggests that it certainly appears likely that the Bridgettine nuns were aware of Margery Kempe; her pilgrimage sixty years previously, her commitment to St Bridget and her engagement with ‘Syon favourites’ Rolle and Bonaventure remain strong ‘circumstantial evidence’ for such a claim.[[196]](#footnote-196) Whilst Margery herself, through her engagement with the ‘Syon Pardon’ and the affinity she felt with a nunnery devoted to her adopted patron saint, was part of the spiritual secular community fostered through and by Syon Abbey, their engagement with her work (albeit a more relatable, abstract edition than her memoir) suggests something more interesting and inclusive: a pious lay influence on their own, communal, devotional focus.

The spiritual influence and connectivity of Syon Abbey was wider than that of its contemporaries. The establishing of the site as a place of pilgrimage, their strong and emotive connections to a saint so prevalent and popular to the country as a whole, and greater textual engagement and commission than any other nunnery of the era naturally and rightly place the Abbey at the heart of the character and practices of late medieval English spirituality. Yet it is also fair to say that Syon was very much a product of its fifteenth-century time: built barely generations before it was eventually dissolved, it was a demonstrative place in the devotional community of the period of spirituality it both reflected and informed. The similarities in reading material, though almost incomparably more extensive than that of our other monastic case studies, and the engagement held with surrounding laity, suggest these internalised and emphatic spiritual focuses were as thorough and as important elsewhere.

*Conclusions*

In addressing these three case studies, so notable in their economic, regional and size differences, several unifying conclusions can be drawn about the establishment and furthering of devotional communities, both within and far broader than the convent. Firstly, the textual exchanges witnessed through the study of Dartford Priory, the Yorkshire Cistercians and Syon Abbey demonstrate both a physical, practical engagement with the lay public, as well as a shared religious fervour. The often secular-monastic dimensions of the manuscripts, or in Swine’s case, the clerical-enclosed relationship of gifting, suggest an external pastoral engagement with the women religious in the nunneries, providing them with works that supported and could further influence the spirituality the Houses were known for. The localisation of such convents, and their reputations, then, sits firmly within their communities.

The themes of such works are even more telling in establishing communal links between convents and the outside world. The varying generational character and differing spiritual emphasis of each case study is less pronounced than the unity discovered in the focuses of their reading materials; while study is obviously limited with regards to how many texts survive, those that do suggest a profound engagement with the internalised, de-professionalised and contemplative nature of late medieval English piety. For fifteenth-century Syon, founded to honour a saint only a century old and firmly regarded as one of the most important mystics of the era, such engagement is perhaps unsurprising. Even within Dartford, the Dominican feelings of *ars moriendi* and Marian devotion provide if not a straight-forward interpretation, than at least a strong precursor to such emphasis. For the Yorkshire Cistercians, however, despite the most limited of surviving texts, this internal reflection within and outside small monastic communities is still pronounced and influential. The engagement with the laity through these texts further supports the idea that such piety was not only monastic to laity (or, as it were, inward-out), but was in fact a two-way, highly symbiotic and flexible process, determining the devotional community of the county and inspired by what was read and internalised in convents.

The practicalities of more local community activity too places the religiosity of the houses and orders within a deeply communal context, even, in the Yorkshire case study, if such engagement appears to contradict the more traditional spiritual character associated with the order. It was the textual assertions found within their reading material that supported and encouraged this enthusiasm beyond the convent walls. In providing healthcare, financial help and charity, the Cistercian women went quite beyond their specifically enclosed and worldly-removed High Middle Age selves. The communal activities of education and spiritual aids provided at Dartford and Syon further this idea of communal engagement as essential. Yet the practicalities of such worldliness was reflected through their religiosity: texts supported (at least partially) secular commitments, and it was through heavily spiritually motivated means (specific relics and their associations, the pardons for secular sin) that such practical communal involvement was carried out. This not only supports the idea of women religious as supported by the religious understandings of the secular people around them, but crucially, as impacting upon the devotional practices of their surrounding community.

Female religious piety and their subsequent pious activities ensured their involvement within the local communities close to them, and across the nation-wide community of internalised devotion that categorised late medieval England. Yet they too were influenced by the world around them, by relationships formed before their enclosure with laity, and by the variations of their religious communities that appeared important to those around them.

***Chapter Two: The Visual and Material in the Monastic Community***

*Introductions*

Written sometime around the turn of the sixteenth century, MS Rawlinson D. 403 is certainly not remarkable for its status as a devotional manuscript made for the women of Syon Abbey by their brethren. As stated in the previous chapter, the Abbey’s prolific use of printing, commissioning and engagement with contemporary and relevant devotional material built a wealth of works for the enclosed, focusing on guides to pious lives and good death, meditations on Christ’s passion and the internalisation of communally-held belief.[[197]](#footnote-197) MS Rawlinson D. 403 is an excellent example of their texts, featuring so many of these themes so abundantly. Illustrating them, on the versos of folios 1-3, are intricate and visually striking depictions of the death of Christ as the typically-Late Medieval ‘Man of Sorrows’, his grieving mother in a Marian *Pietà*, and the Last Judgement, featuring a macabre Hell littered with bones, sculls and demons accompany Latin prayers and devotions to St Bridget.[[198]](#footnote-198) Given that they so closely mirror the pious themes of the devotional community that their owners and readers belonged to, the fact that images like these were occasionally seen and commissioned alongside such texts is perhaps unsurprising. MS Rawlinson D. 403 is a further and typical example of how their textual and devotional community was constructed and maintained.

Texts and the material they contained were responsible for structuring, connecting and giving shape to the communities that held them, informing spiritually-engaged links between groups and instilling all female readers in a wide community of shared devotion. Yet there is another complementary but fundamentally crucial element of communal monastic life that these pictures in the Syon book embody and of which they are emblematic. The images found in MS Rawlinson D. 403 are more than a singular illustration of characteristic themes of late Medieval, English female monastic spirituality. This imagery was a point of devotion in itself, providing a visual intercessor between the human and the divine that reflected the spiritual messages of the texts. The images further informed and recreated this devotional community, inspiring advancing generations and reforming community links, consciously and unconsciously, every day. The religious imagery that coloured so much of the spiritual experiences within this devotional community functioned to ‘identify and articulate a range of subjective patterns of feeling *and* to give objective form to feeling.’[[199]](#footnote-199) What the nuns *saw*, what made up their everyday surroundings in some of the most intimate and spiritually imperative parts of their lives, will be addressed in this chapter as a visual, material culture (a discussion of the term will follow) that impacted upon and be impacted by their communities. Visual culture both formed and informed the devotional community of late medieval England and it was the women religious within it that particularly demonstrated and internalised its vast spiritual and practical communal importance.

Visual culture is one of the fastest-growing areas in medieval scholarship, with academics keen to introduce inter-disciplinary methodology and utilise source material previously overlooked. Jeffrey F. Hamburger, to whose ground-breaking research on German nuns and their artistic expressions this chapter on their English equivalents owes much, suggested that such previous negligence is partly a result of the silence of contemporaries regarding the role of art with and within theology:

‘The sermon that takes an extant image as its point of departure, the commentary that invokes a particular work of art, the treatise that discusses the role of images, real or imagined, in devotional experience or monastic life, let alone popular piety: all remain rare compared to the enormous corpus of exegeses and theological writings.’ [[200]](#footnote-200)

While theologians did not devote the same amount of philosophising to either the images themselves or the roles they played in devotional practice, in terms of English enclosed women, two more modern problems of historiography have prevented the nuns’ visual culture from being illuminated. As with so many aspects of female monastic life of the Middle Ages, the relative lack of surviving source material, especially in comparison to the male, remains an undeniable problem; the woodcut images that begin this chapter, for example, are not common in the surviving texts that belonged to English women religious, partly due to the fact that, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, so many manuscripts failed to survive the reforming efforts and Dissolution of the sixteenth century. Sources that appear with relative frequency on the Continent – needlework, small spiritual sculpture, in addition to texts and their images – have been, if not completely lost, then certainly dramatically reduced.

This is no truer than with respect to the physical centres of their devotional community. The ruination or partial secular conversion of so many religious houses across England in the decades following 1540 has rendered it virtually impossible to analyse the artistic expressions of female monastic architecture (though Roberta Gilchrist’s pioneering work on the archaeology of English nunneries, to which this chapter will soon return in more detail, goes a long, in-depth way to addressing this balance). In reforming ideology, such religious buildings were representative of an irrelevant and, at worst, God-less and superstitious age. Alexandra Walsham successfully argued that, as well as the iconoclasm of the post-Dissolution, there existed a separate impulse with regards to the very public and ‘see-able’ nature of convent architecture: ‘a desire to preserve mutilated remnants of idolatry as enduring evidence of Protestantism’s glorious triumph over the forces of the devil and the Antichrist.’[[201]](#footnote-201) Such empty or ruined spaces conveyed ‘the menacing lesson that the Lord was a jealous God who wiped dens of sin and view from the face of the earth.’[[202]](#footnote-202) The few ruins that have endured have not been ignored by scholarship, but unfortunately, most fall on the opposing gender side; male houses, and the sometimes dramatic and beautiful architectural remains they have left behind, have to be studied instead, as so little of their female contemporaries homes survive at all.

Having lost nearly all architectural constructions and the spiritual materials and decorations within them, it might at first appear that the physical evidence of monastic communal lives is all but gone; leaving as blank a canvas as the ruins left by reformers are stark. For all the problems that beset nunneries post-1536/9, however, evidence still remains, in brief and sometimes hard to decipher images, which support and prove the vibrancy of female monastic visual culture prior to the Reformation. The fragments that remain offer glimpses into a vital and figurative world: the woodcuts and coloured illuminations that so dramatically illustrate key themes of spirituality in late medieval devotional texts; the numerous monastic seals that display both traditional and surprising symbols of faith and piety; the imagery used within metaphors and rhetoric in devotional literature, illustrative of a wider, more accessible world; the saved and precious remains of architecture still standing in modern churches; the rare, beautiful examples of needlework; not to mention the archaeological understanding of now-destroyed architecture. This chapter will employ all of these examples to build, if this is not stretching the metaphor too greatly, a picture of a visual and material culture embedded and essential to everyday religious life, as well as the devotional community on a wider, more inclusive scale.

For historians across the continent, particularly in monastically-well preserved archives of Italy and Germany, such issues of primary material are less prevalent, yet still historiography is lacking. Instead, as this work has thoroughly stated before, a general lack of interest has afflicted the study of nuns within medieval art history, rendering them more image-less than their male and lay contemporaries. The main historiographical construction for viewing these vital images is, as Hamburger stated, ‘one of exclusion and disregard.’[[203]](#footnote-203) Hamburger based his definitive study around material that had previously been not only under-used but frankly dismissed; the derogative terming of ‘*Nonnenarbeiten*’ to flatly describe the varying forms and functions of images made and commissioned by women religious is a phrase with which he began, with the aim to ‘find a way of talking about these images… that does not patronise them or assume that the *Malerin*, or convent painter, was trying to do what her male contemporaries were doing, but failing.’[[204]](#footnote-204) The images created and commissioned by his subjects might be ugly, ill-formed or infantile in form to modern, or indeed medieval eyes, but, however ‘inaccessible to conventional aesthetics, these unassuming images remain more or less intractable to other forms of inquiry [into lives of the religious].’[[205]](#footnote-205) The idea that female monastic art is simply un-usable or unworthy seems to pervade scholarship, explaining the emptiness in face of so much varying material.

Such a negative view is, of course, being challenged by superb and far-reaching scholarship. When introducing her interdisciplinary edited volume on female monasticism in early modern Europe, Cordula von Whye pointed to the growing understanding of nuns as ‘active agent[s] rather than… passive receptor[s] of social dictates and ecclesiastical wishes’, with nuns seen as ‘artist, pedagogue, political activist, saint and mystic.’[[206]](#footnote-206) The idea of patronage and artistic expression as a manifestation of faith and of agency in particular is a growing field of enquiry, through both women’s and art history. With art historians beginning to reflect ‘on the complexity of the relationships that have always existed between the production of art objects and their first owners’, the connections between female commissioners, makers, users and the art itself present what was singularly important to them and their (female) audience; ‘because it was one of the few domains in which a public role was sanctioned, patronage was an area that provided rich opportunities for women to make their voices heard… [and] for what it reveals about their enthusiasms, concerns and aspirations.’[[207]](#footnote-207) All involve an understanding of women as involved in their devotional community, but engaged and informed through visual culture.

It is within Corinne Schleif and Volker Schier’s authoritative work *Katerina’s Windows: Donation and Devotion, Art and Music, as seen and heard through the writings of a Brigettine Nun*, that the patronage and agency of a nun in terms of both devotional community and visual culture is most clearly and recently expressed. Through Katherina’s own writings as she commissioned and oversaw the creation of new illuminated windows at her cloister, Schlief and Schier masterfully brought together the interpretations of art history as demonstrative of a consciously female self and her artistic expression with the mentality-based study of her motivations as an enclosed religious woman. For Schlief and Schier, the artistic images that Katerina was overseeing quite obviously were impacted by her, but they also uncover her consciousness of the role art played in influencing devotion of future women in her convent. They analysed the role her particular order played upon her reception and understanding of image and the world around her, lending a specific, constructed methodology to a case study that might otherwise have appeared exclusive or simply unrepresentative.[[208]](#footnote-208)

Yet the methodology of approaching medieval visual culture, and what this visual culture really *is*, as distinct from the *material* world, is far from fixed. This is due, in part, to one of the great strengths of this historiography; its inter-disciplinary nature amongst scholars, keen to present something new from the spaces in-between existing frameworks (‘[exploring] such thresholds – connecting the visual and verbal, the sensory and performative, the literal and metaphorical, the social and epistemological’)[[209]](#footnote-209). While medieval images ‘are no longer viewed as static pieces of evidence that generate singular meanings and thus disclose irrefutable truths about the past… these objects are phenomena whose meanings and functions change with each encounter, thereby revealing many competing narratives.’[[210]](#footnote-210) As such, visual culture is ‘still an idea in the making, rather than a well-defined existing field’, entailing a definition of it to be subject to ‘greater levels of uncertainty, risk and arbitrariness.’[[211]](#footnote-211)

The difficulty in addressing medieval visual culture is further complicated by the cross-over with material culture studies, with Caroline Walker Bynum addressing the role and definition of ‘matter’ (tangible, visual, material, etc.) as ‘problematic – it was not static and inert; it was by definition potent and changeable…[meaning] several different things – each of them complex and broad.’[[212]](#footnote-212) Bynum contended with the particularly thorny issue of visual culture overlapping with material culture, stating that, despite the recent focus of scholarship on ‘vision more than object, objects were what the faithful revered, travelled to, and made offerings for. However much medieval intellectuals may have insisted on an ontological gap between the image (or sign) and exemplar (or signified), what images displayed was their materiality.’[[213]](#footnote-213) The use of ‘matter’, its variable significance and the way in which it was conceived all alter how and whether such evidence is judged to be more ‘material’ than ‘visual.’

In many works on medieval visual culture, the two terms are used concurrently and almost interchangeably, displaying understanding of the connected purposes of decoration, usefulness, practicality and need found within surviving evidence of late medieval ‘matter’ or ‘things’. In terms of English female monastic ‘matter’, and the remains of medieval monasticism more generally, such delineations cannot be clear cut, with the evidence suggesting a far greater interweaving of what is material, and what remains visual, based on the content of the illustration itself. If, as Walker Bynum suggested, materiality is based on tangibility, devotional books belonging to a convent, for example, remain material culture. However, the images they contain, while they themselves are touchable, remain a focus for the eye and to instil devotion not through the act of holding, but through the act of seeing. Further, examples of needlework that decorates an otherwise functional sacramental object, providing a visual focus for devotion through what is displayed, remain, nevertheless, something demonstrative of material life in late medieval church services.

To separate the two, therefore, appears counter-productive, creating divisions where the makers and users of such ‘things’ did not. The common-place materiality of a ‘thing’ only emphasises its visual impact, and the illustration or decoration of something functional does not remove its functionality, but rather says something specific about how important the function of such a ‘thing’ was. For the purposes of this work, the visual and material cultures of English women religious will be addressed in this connected, complementary way. The decorated and the practical appear to be so interconnected in the surviving material of female English religious life that the terms of visual vs material are unhelpful – the very nature of the imagery and images used, invoked and venerated by these nuns is that of a two-way devotional process, as will be discussed, leaving the definitions importantly and inexorably joined.

The variations of evidence that remains suggest important themes within the visual and material culture of English female monasticism, connecting ideas of enclosure, particularly female-centric, female-headed spirituality and the world that surrounds and informs their lives. Through three case-studies that demonstrate, in theory at least, remarkably different attitudes towards artistic styles and visual culture, a broad understanding of the ways in which environment and materials impacted upon and were impacted by the female religious around them will be asserted. Further, the work will draw parallels to their contemporary sisters in Germany and link together strands of historiography of nuns’ visual culture, bringing late medieval and early modern English nuns into the fold in a more inclusive way. Using devotional illustrations and the various imagery of saints that coloured spiritual lives, the devotional community of these women will be addressed separately from their manifestations in and through texts, revealing both the separate and connected ways in which the visual impacts upon devotion. Through examination of religious symbolism found so frequently across numerous visual mediums, the everyday world of these women can be reinterpreted in a hyper-visual, sensory way, with this chapter seeking to explore the visual manifestations of an all-encompassing pictorial system. Finally, the more worldly (and, perhaps surprisingly, greatly prevalent) elements found in the female religious’ evidence will be addressed, shown through the grotesque, the decadent and the gift-given, exploring how and why secular themes were expressed through and in remaining visual material.

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The images of a wounded, bloody Christ, his grieving, deeply human mother and the depths and despairs of Hell within MS Rawlinson D. 403 are, contextually, part of the texts that make up such a vibrant devotional community that both embraced and was embraced by women religious. However, to see these pictures as indistinct from the words that surround them, to see them as merely passively illustrative of what is being said around them is to both misunderstand the devotional point of the image, and to misrepresent the devotional culture of English women religious as being without illustration, colour or sensory experience. The imagery found within needlework, on seals belonging to monastic houses, on the surroundings in church at times of spiritual reflection and emotional importance – all offer an unparalleled look into another aspect of the devotional community of English women religious. These are glimpses that solidify and demonstrate the devotional community they built and were building, as well as recreate, reform and re-engage both individual monastic groups and this larger community.

*Feeling the Image: Vision, Empathy and the Compassionate Image*

The Mary of the woodcut in MS Rawlinson D. 403 was famous in late medieval devotional life. The image of a pained mother holding her crucified son at the foot of the Cross is one of the most recognisable, if not archetypal, images of the period’s piety. The popular depiction of the Virgin Mary had transformed across the centuries, embodying a glorious, triumphant Queen of Heaven to be revered; a study of the openness and vulnerability of youth; a depiction of the peace and tenderness between a young mother and her new-born baby; and, lastly, a representation of overwhelming, physically-reducing grief. She represented, so often, the *Zeitgeist* of what it meant to be and to worship as a Christian in medieval Europe, embodying the feelings and emotions her viewers were meant to be experiencing and thinking. Miri Rubin summed up the collectivism of Mary in asserting that ‘images of Mary were particularly rich in offering opportunities for identification… Moments for reflection on motherhood, conjugality, virginity, nurture and bereavement, were all offered up around the well-known and loved figure of Mary.’[[214]](#footnote-214) The image of her grief both symbolised and defined the movement towards and understanding of the internalised and deeply emotively-focused belief of the later Middle Ages. It was around this image that so many of the works in the previous chapter were centred, with the *Pietà* and Marian devotion a central part of the devotional community of English female monasticism.

Yet, as an image, as something made, inherently, to be seen for and of itself, the visual nature of the Marian Pietà in MS Rawlinson D. 403 must be considered alongside its modern and, because of this, projected role as emblematic of the devotion of an age. The relationship between the image, the words that surround it and the viewer is very much one of an active relationship; the image was not merely an illustration, but very much an active part of devotion, taking on a significance greater than the two-dimensional and transcending the stationary. The religious image of the late medieval period was focused heavily on invoking and portraying emotion, and was not simply meant to be seen, but to be actively, intimately, inherently *felt*.

Marian Pietàs and the equally recognisable ‘Man of Sorrows’ Christ image are at the heart of the ‘feeling’ image. For English women religious, these types of image, this version of Christ and Mary, which was most thoroughly seen and disseminated among their visual material. Appearing in devotional books alongside treatise and works on the Passion, in monastic seals that presented their Abbey or Priory to the world and, in one particularly special case, worked in needlework on an important sacramental costume, the compassionate image was a mainstay of the visual worlds of the women in Dartford, Syon and the Yorkshire Cistercian houses. While each order had their own connection to, and understanding of, the Virgin and her Son, the connections and discrepancies between each identification will be explored in this section. Similar themes of compassion-centric spirituality will be addressed, as, through the visual worlds of late medieval English religious women, they are embodied and emboldened in different, complementary and contradictory ways. The evidence from each house will be taken collectively, not only because of the relatively few pieces that survive for each individual study, but predominately in order to identify the communal connections embodied in these devotional images and further the first chapter’s understanding of devotional communities through text. The compassionate image reflected broad spiritual trends demonstrated in the textual material of English women religious, but equally, it did not remain a passive illustration, instead influencing piety in and of itself across order-ed and geographical divides.

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The surviving texts of the English Dominican, Bridgettine and Yorkshire Cistercian women, as the first chapter has explored, focused heavily on the traditionally late medieval idea of introverted piety and guides to spiritually enriched, compassion-filled lives, using the Passion, emphasis on Mary and examples from popular, near-contemporary saints. The books that survive are, with only a few notable exceptions, generally without pictorial illustration; the woodcuts belonging to Syon Abbey manuscripts are not the norm across the rest of the female monastic community. There are many reasons why this is the case; the expense of producing books and their illustrations, as well as the proximity to technology and patrons who could print them, separate Syon Abbey from its contemporary convents. Additionally, the vast depletion of convent libraries post-Dissolution suggests that even if there had been any more, it remains near impossible for the historian to recreate and access this visual culture through print.[[215]](#footnote-215)

While the devotional works of Dartford, the Yorkshire Cistercians and other Houses across England do not contain the same level of imagery as their wealthier contemporary, their compassionate themes engendered through words are certainly not *imageless*. The lyrical depictions of the Passion and the trials of saints brought to life the compassionate storytelling at the heart of their devotional community in the most vibrant, expressive and, crucially, visual of ways. This empathetic response to these images correspond with Brian Stock’s understanding of the post-fourteenth-century reading practice of *lectio spiritualis*, centred not on the biblical text but ‘on the reader’s emotional response and spiritual progress… [which] could take place entirely in silence… [and] emphasised the subjective words and images that might arise in the reader’s mind both during and after the textual encounter.’[[216]](#footnote-216)

The emphasis on Christ’s blood and the violent details of the crucifixion in the Dartford text MS Douce 322, touched upon in Chapter One, is one of the most visual examples; structured in short, punchy lines and memorable rhyming stanzas, the descriptive focus on the sheer ‘bloodiness’ of the event is every bit as visual and graphic to the reader as if it had a picture besides it. Chiming with the Dominican emphasis on good deaths and remembrance of Christ’s body and its pains, the allusions that the language makes are not only a broad and fundamental part of this late medieval devotional community, but they instil a particularly relevant order-ed identity aspect to the compassionate image.

Metaphors of darkness and light bluntly depict good and evil, lending this battle of the soul, a battle to be truly felt and internally experienced, a truly visual dimension. The compassionate images portrayed through text are not any less part of the visual culture of English women religious because they are not pictorial. Imparting spiritual relevance to a material object, the imagery created by words, rather than illustration, helped the female reader to visualise and internalise the horrors and bodily pains of Christ, and by extension, instilled the compassionate image into the central understanding of their faith.[[217]](#footnote-217) Though the compassionate image was not always so oblique in its construction and display as through language, the ways in which images were received and understood by women religious in the period is far from one-dimensional. The theory of medieval art, and the specifically *devotio moderna* aspects of late medieval spirituality, provided ‘not only the privileged context for authentic religious experiences, but… the concrete material with which the faithful realise[d] the imitation of Christ.’[[218]](#footnote-218) For Kessler, the purpose of material images was to ‘demonstrate God’s essential unseeability by disabling carnal vision’, and with the images meant to ‘transform the sensual impressions derived from looking at artistic representations into mental contemplations.’[[219]](#footnote-219)

In terms of the compassionate image, Hamburger pointed out that, using the Passion as an example, ‘where we might see only an image of unbridled violence, the woman by (and perhaps for whom) it was made… would have experienced more complex meanings and sensations.’[[220]](#footnote-220) Art historians have reflected this trend, turning away from thinking about the content of the messages contained in the remnants of medieval visual culture, ‘to an interest in the ways in which they were communicated to their audience,’ with the ‘perception of texts’ and their role in ‘acts of communication’ that were, in terms of devotional community, motivated by and based firmly within the spiritual self.[[221]](#footnote-221) A picture of an emaciated, crucified Christ communicated compassionate responses in viewing it, but also, sacramentally, inspired a point of devotion that went beyond words and beyond linear representation; it provided a place and an idea where, through prayer, a person could ‘move from material images to direct communication with the divine.’[[222]](#footnote-222) The inscriptions below the Man of Sorrows and Pietà in the Rawlinson manuscript explicitly prompt this seeing and feeling:

‘To them that before this ymage of pyte devoutly say fyne [?] Pater noster… [and] a Credo… holding these armes of [Christ’s] passion ar granted…iv yeres of pardon’ [Beneath the Man of Sorrows]

‘Wh[e]n hou [?] ever devoutly beholdith these arms off christis passion hat… iv yeres off pardon’ [beneath Pieta].[[223]](#footnote-223)

The insistence to literally ‘see’ images of this kind, Miles argued, is demonstrative of a desire by the worshipper to ‘place him/herself in the most immediate and strong contact with the object of devotion.’[[224]](#footnote-224) In assessing ‘Gothic piety’ as distinguished by ‘devotional gaze[s]’ and ‘visual piety’, Thomas Lentes concluded that ‘images were the very sacrament of the pious – and the gaze and picture worship were their liturgy.’[[225]](#footnote-225) A kind of ‘double-seeing’ is therefore at work with regards to late medieval devotional images: the physical viewing of a spiritual item or picture was meant to inspire ‘a visualisation of the spiritual signified’, while internalising the image was to be seen in the soul.[[226]](#footnote-226)

For the late medieval female religious viewer, the empathetic image was not a simple, one-way process; a focus on the Passion or the Pietà naturally reflected the broad trend of de-professionalised and mystic devotion but, through the ‘double seeing’ theory and practice of the period’s visual material, this imagery actively encouraged and impacted upon devotion, becoming in itself a part of the spiritual process. Their visual material is a close reflection of belief, but almost immediately, such material influences devotion just as prominently. Nowhere is this clearer than when we compare two contemporary European Bridgettine houses and two of their most public and expressive compassionate images.

In early sixteenth-century Nuremberg, Katerina Lemmel, or Sister Anna, was busy overseeing the completion of new stained glass windows in her convent. Her letters – one of the most exhaustive and vibrant set of surviving sources for late medieval women, but particularly remarkable as evidence of enclosed life – to her male cousin discuss the undertaking of the project that he had helped to fund, and over which she had artistic control. Through these works, the reader glimpses an unparalleled look into the inner workings of convent life and, importantly, how their surroundings affected their devotion. In one particular letter of 1519, Katerina writes to her cousin that ‘the windows please us very much, as do the images. But you should also know that they are not all made to arouse desire; that couldn’t be done.’[[227]](#footnote-227) Writing that ‘They [the artists commissioned to paint] always want to make them [Biblical figures] in a new strange way’, she is vocally upfront with her critique of the art’s finer details (‘One paints our dear Lord only with red and gray hair. I believe there is little honor with this. All the figures of our dear Lord have just gray hair’), implying a favouritism of uniformity and convention across all images that adorn the convent. Her next critical analysis, however, goes even further in displaying how much her devotion and artistic eye complement the other –

‘You have certainly seen it – where our beloved Lord is crowned – he sits there like a fat priest! He should have painted him in a red mantle, all wounded and bloody. He could certainly have made many of the figures in such a way that the viewers’ desires would be more aroused. And when he carries the cross, he also does not arouse desire. I implored Master Veit, when he was here, to make them in such a way that they arouse viewers’ longing, since you are giving him so much money for them.’[[228]](#footnote-228)

Later, she describes the other images recently completed, and describes where they will be positioned in the monastery –

‘We have placed the Coronation of the Virgin above the coat of arms of my dead departed cousin, and it appears to arouse desire and looks very devotional… to you, Our Dear Lord’s Evening Meal [the last Supper] [will be reckoned]; and after, one after the other, the Seven Falls [of Christ]. And we thought we wanted to have all of your names written in large letters on the wall above them, in the order of your age, as I wrote down, for a memorial… Only now does it look like a monastery! Therefore you should not regret it!’[[229]](#footnote-229)

Katerina’s comments on the new images adorning her convent are not only fascinating because of the level of detail she spends describing what we now, post Reformation and five hundred years later, struggle to imagine, but how closely related her feelings towards the images are with the compassionate visual material so important to late medieval devotion. The fact that Jesus ‘looks like a fat priest’ is abhorrent to Katerina not because his plumpness reminds her of the excesses and extravagance of the clergy – although the sly, exclamation mark-ed analogy does suggest a certain disdain for her male spiritual superiors, one that presumably her aristocratic cousin shared – but primarily because Christ does not look like the pitiful and despised figure that she recognises and loves. For her, the only image of Jesus, especially with relation to the crucifixion, is one that should ‘arouse desire’, or create and reflect a deeply human, deeply sympathetic response to his plight, in order that the context of pain and sacrifice be most clearly understood. In her suggestions that Christ should have had a ‘red and bloody mantle’ in ‘carrying the cross’, Katerina betrays her own understandings, and a great trend, of visual piety that focuses fundamentally on the same bloody imagery that MS Douce 322 created with words.

The importance placed on ‘arousal of viewers longing’ displays Katerina’s absolute commitment to the emotional responses informed by the images. Such concerns, however, go further than an artistic and spiritual anxiety; hers is, consciously or not, a commitment to the present and, critically, future women of the convent. The compassionate images, which Katerina does not consider to be suitably empathetic, are there not for decoration, but for the spiritual depth and devotional betterment of the women who are enclosed by them. In finally stating ‘only now it looks like a monastery!’ Katerina emphasises not only the imperativeness of visual material to convent life, but *why* such images are essential. By surrounding them with this visual material, visual material that focuses so heavily on the compassionate image, generations of women are and will be supported within and by a devotional community of shared empathy and emotional responses.

Just as with Katerina’s windows, the visual material culture of English female abbeys often has to be recreated through the textual descriptions that survive, painting an often vivid picture. The Rule of Syon Abbey is one such document that describes in detail the use and role compassionate imagery plays in devotional communities of a house. Reciting the ceremonial procession of a novice about to take her vows, the nun-to-be’s wedding to Christ was based heavily around her ritualistic arrival beneath a banner, decorated with images that were familiar to her Nuremberg and national sisters:

“[The Bishop asks] ‘Seekest thou… into this religion in the name of Jesus Christ, and in honour of his most holy mother the Virgin Mary?’ She saying, ‘I seek it,’ the bishop introduced her into the church, saying ‘Behold, now, she worthily enters this religion.’ And when she entered the church, a red banner was borne before her, on one side of which was represented the body of Christ crucified, and the image of the Blessed Virgin on the other; that the new bride, regarding the image of the new bridegroom suffering on the cross, might learn patience and poverty, and regarding the Virgin Mother, might learn chastity and humility.”[[230]](#footnote-230)

At the most important moment and pivotal moments of a woman’s ascension into the Abbey, her experience is coloured and quite literally overshadowed by an image of Christ’s suffering, as well the Marian scene. The compassionate image of her new ‘bridegroom suffering on the cross’ is not only recognisable from devotional linguistic imagery and Abbey woodcuts, but in the context of the Bridgettine order rule, displays a late medieval understanding of exactly what the empathetic pictures mean and show. Attempting to instil within the novice patience and poverty from the image of the Passion and chastity and humility from the Virgin’s picture, the Rule unequivocally invokes the power of the compassionate image and asserts its hoped-for impact within the young nun. The understanding of the compassionate image for the women of Syon Abbey and Katerina’s Bridgettine Nuremberg house is far from an unconscious, background-relegated element; it is an important and ‘choice’ element of the make-up of the convent, aiming to provide spiritual nourishment that chimes so exactly with the devotional community trends of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The idea that compassion-centric images and imagery were central to spirituality is not specific to the Bridgettines, as it influenced not only the broad devotional feelings but equally the specific convent liturgy of the Cistercians. Though little survives of their physical Yorkshire presence, female Cistercians across the continent offer an interesting parallel with both their order-ed contemporaries and the artistically-minded work of Katerina Lemmel at Nuremberg. In 1488, the abbess of the reforming Cistercian nuns at Weinhausen ‘had the wall paintings in the nuns’ choir repainted or restored by three members of her convent.’[[231]](#footnote-231) The decoration, displaying the Easter liturgy and culminating in the Passion, is supported by a full range of visual material (‘sculptures, stained-glass windows and wall paintings in the cloister… [and] textiles such as tapestries and antependia, and by manuscripts for private and liturgical use’) that placed the women that witnessed it *within* their faith. These empathetic images, created by women of the convent in a show of individual agency and artistic autonomy, demonstrated that their monastic experience was central in the liturgy of Christ’s sacrifice.[[232]](#footnote-232) Gisela Muschiol summed this up by stating that ‘[these decorations] create a quasi-presence of the pivotal biblical events, which time and again immerses the sisters celebrating the liturgy in the visualisation both of monastic history and the history of salvation.’[[233]](#footnote-233)

One of the most singular and crucial pieces of evidence that survives from Late Medieval female monasticism in England is one that combines this liturgical aspect of the Passion with that of Marian devotion and the empathetic, ‘feeling’ image. The Syon Cope, one of the most beautiful and enigmatic examples of needlework produced in the period of *Opus Anglicanum* displays in the most colourful and tangible way the life of Christ’s mother, displaying scenes from Mary’s later life, showing her surrounded by saints and at her heavenly coronation.[[234]](#footnote-234) The Crucifixion scene, showing an emaciated Christ encircled by his mother and St Paul, sits at the centre of the needlework, surrounded by quatrefoils of equal size illustrating Mary’s journey to Heaven, as she is carried and flanked by angels. The focus of this textile is undoubtedly Mary’s divine ascension, as the viewer witnesses, in almost story-board fashion, the story of Marian motherhood and saintliness. She inspires here, as she invokes compassionate love.

Dating the needlework remains contentious, with the production time varying from the late thirteenth to the end of the fourteenth century, but it remains one of the most complete pieces of embroidery from the whole late medieval English period, measuring close to an impressive 10 by 5 feet.[[235]](#footnote-235) Scholars have failed to trace the origins of this vibrant orange, cream and green-hued work, with no record of it before it is found in the inventories of Syon Abbey at the Dissolution.[[236]](#footnote-236) What can be ascertained, however, is the fact that the Cope must have been acquired, either by procurement or commission, in just over a century between Syon Abbey’s foundation and the 1539 closure; this may not appear sufficiently narrow nor indeed greatly significant, but it does lend a specific and relatively short time frame to when the Cope was (presumably) in use at the Abbey. Contextually, then, this needlework, displayed at times of important spiritual and sacramental moments, seen by the entire congregation, reflected the same motifs and visual trends demonstrated in the novice ceremony banners – that of Mary’s motherhood at the Passion and her sanctity through humanity as central to the devotion of English monasticism. It held a specific and certain place at the heart of particularly female enclosed sanctity.

While it can only be speculated upon as to when and how often the Cope was used, it is worth noting the context of the rise of the Marian liturgy, a particularly late medieval aspect of Christian devotion; the widespread use of the Office of Our Lady on Saturday was not only assigned for daily use within this work’s closely–related case-studies of the Cistercians and Dominicans, but it was also closely associated with the Carthusians, the brethren house of Syon.[[237]](#footnote-237) The fourteenth-century liturgical additions of prayers and hymns, so mindful and suggestive of the empathetic image in their visually-inspired rhetoric ‘Salve, mater misercordiae’ (Hail, Mother of Mercy), and ‘Stabat mater dolorosa’ (At the cross her station keeping), similarly, reflect the changing emphasis of Mary’s role within devotion; earlier popular prayers, such as ‘Ave, maris stella’ (Hail, Star of the Sea) or ‘O quam glorifica’ (O, how glorious), are far more focused on the Romanesque, regal Mary of the early and high Middle Ages.[[238]](#footnote-238) Therefore we can ascertain that the Syon Cope, the visual manifestation of Mary’s life and importance, was used in these Marian Offices, weekly and with the reverence afforded to a woman whom so inspired them and their patron saint. When seen alongside the visual material culture of compassionate imagery across female monastic houses, the Cope reflects perfectly this trend of encouraging an emotional response through surroundings, no matter how conscious, with liturgical links that crossed so emphatically order-ed borders.

The fact remains, though, that the Syon Cope is remarkable. While it does appear that enclosed women from Yorkshire, Syon and Dartford were involved in sewing, little remains of the work that they made, and even less to describe how they were decorated and what they adorned. While the devotional literature, and the imagery within them, backs compassionate-focused connections across the case studies of this work, a more substantial comparison of physical material will define more assertively how these connections manifest themselves in visual culture. Monastic seals, the most universal of monastery symbols and by far the most complete selection of medieval, cross-house surviving material, allow such a wide-ranging comparison, presenting understandings of how each convent displayed themselves to the world around them and what they deemed the most important and iconic devotional image of their house. As Roberta Gilchrist asserted, in her ground-breaking work on monastery seals from the houses of women religious, ‘the imagery prevalent during the life of a nunnery was best reflected in the iconography of its seal.’[[239]](#footnote-239)

It is not a surprise that the Marian image is one of the most popular across all nunneries, but in particular that of Dartford, Syon and the Yorkshire Cistercians.[[240]](#footnote-240) From these fourteen houses, Mary appears in different forms on seven seals but, as can be seen from Gilchrist’s categorisation, such Marian iconography appears with great regularity across all female monastic English houses.[[241]](#footnote-241) The different presentations of Mary (Throne of Wisdom: Swine, Hampole and Wykeham; Crowned Virgin, standing: Nunappleton; Seated Virgin: Basedale and Swine; Coronation of Mary: Dartford) reflect changes in devotional practice and community, as this compassionate image changes and is subverted.

The *Pietà*, interestingly, is never displayed on these seals – probably because such an image spiked in popularity after these houses and therefore, their seals, had been founded and fully established. So what can the remaining Marian images explain about the visual culture of empathetic imagery? Gilchrist traces a slight change in her presentation from the Romanesque (a regal ‘hieratic icon’, standing with baby Christ) to the Gothic (a gentler, more reverent Mary) in monastic seals, but suggests, as the remaining seals of these three case-studies support, that the Throne of Wisdom image (the Virgin sat, crowned and holding the infant Jesus) remained constant in its popularity from the twelfth century, spanning ‘filiation, status, geographical and temporal space.’[[242]](#footnote-242)

The decidedly authoritative and Romanesque Marian image in these seals suggest a certain Cistercian-defined confidence and emphasis; dating from the twelfth century, devotion to Mary and the propagation of her cult had been a significant aspect of Cistercian life and spirituality, and is reflected in the dedications of monasteries like those in Yorkshire, who are, almost without exception, dedicated to the Virgin.[[243]](#footnote-243) The commanding visualisation of Mary, crowned, throned and upright, is, Karen Stöber argued, as much a reflection on their secular patron as of the monasteries’ saint: ‘while this very eminent saintly figure did not forego her status as chief patron of a Cistercian community, she might have to tolerate the presence of those who, as lay founders and patrons, might acquire an importance for this community which might elevate them, in their eyes, somewhat beyond the average mortal.’[[244]](#footnote-244)

On a more intrinsically female monastic level, though, it appears difficult to ascertain exactly why this Throne of Wisdom image kept such a vital hold on the iconographical imaginations of late medieval convents. With Marian Pietàs, often seen alongside or near the Man of Sorrows, the empathetic image instils a compassionate response, while encouraging a contextual understanding of the events and outcomes of the most important Christian event. As stated before, the theory of ‘double seeing’ the image makes seeing a *Pietà* a devotional practice in itself. The Throne of Wisdom image displays no such grief or drama, with Gold asserting that it was a new way of representing ‘the traditional Romanesque meaning of the image… [within] the span [of] Christ’s life [cycle]’.[[245]](#footnote-245) But in the context of English female monasticism, it is this inherent contradiction of maternal and regal that suggests something new and unique in the Marian image; that of compassion through her motherhood, and awe of her heavenly role. Through the Throne of Wisdom, Mary is both Gothic and Romanesque, gentle and powerful, human and divine. As an image, it presents a monastic house as both *of* the world in caring and intrinsically feminine, yet consciously, spiritually *removed* from the world. It is the compassionate image that demonstrates the individual convent, and the devotional community of female religious more generally, reason for being.

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For female religious in late medieval England, feeling the images that surrounded and informed their everyday lives was both a conscious and unconscious process. The compassionate images found in imagery, ceremonies, decoration and external symbolism broadly reflected the changing understanding of piety to a more introverted and emphatic system of belief, but to say only this makes such visual material culture appear nothing but a passive refractor of what its creators and commissioners understood. The compassionate images of female monasticism engaged the viewer, informing and influencing their spirituality through shared emotional responses and provoking communal commitments to the same devotional ideals. The compassionate image was created to be felt, and influenced the feeling.

*Another Language: Symbolic Visual Culture*

On the monastic seal for Swine Priory, the Virgin Mary sits, crowned, with the infant Jesus on her left knee, in a familiar and popular Throne of Wisdom iconographical pose. In her right hand, Mary holds a single lily that reaches out and points to the engraving of ‘SWINE’ around the image.[[246]](#footnote-246) It is not a particularly remarkable image; as stressed in the previous section, the Throne of Wisdom appears as the most popular of female monastic house seal iconographies, and yet the depiction of Mary as a seated queen with a baby Jesus is representative of some of the most important themes in the visual material culture of English nuns. The inclusion of the lily in this instance furthers and enhances this depiction, lending a deeply symbolic element for the contemporary women religious, just as the modern viewer is able to ‘read’ the themes of their devotional community into the Throne of Wisdom iconography more generally.

A flower intimately associated with Mary, lilies represented chastity and purity in the medieval imagination, frequently portrayed in pictures of the Annunciation as a symbolic gesture of ‘gifting’ between the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin.[[247]](#footnote-247) The Christ child is often depicted as giving lilies to saints, demonstrating approved virtues, and denoting saints that particularly prized their sexual virtue as a mark of their spiritual integrity (Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, Dominic, Scholastica). Shown surrounded with thorns, the lily represents chastity amongst the temptations and evils of the world.[[248]](#footnote-248) In late medieval Yorkshire, a lily might seem like an exotic and enigmatic choice to be on a seal representing their female monastic house to the world – yet the woman for whom it was made and who used it, and for the world that viewed it, such a symbolic choice appeared to portray complex theological understandings and emotive characters instantly and, crucially, visually. An image of piety such as this lily ‘combined few or no words, but spoke the complex language of saints’ emblems and pictorial conventions… which the medieval audience learnt to ‘read’’.[[249]](#footnote-249)

The historiography of symbolism in medieval art is as multi-layered as the representations themselves. The idea of ‘reading images’, so central to understanding this visual language manipulated and duplicated across different media, is, as Marco Mostert asserts, ‘usually addressed by art historians because visual images tend to be the privileged territory of the art historian.’[[250]](#footnote-250) Often, these studies remain fragmented, with work on the meanings of symbolism categorised and comprehensive but removed from the historical context and mediums of medieval artefacts. Charles Zika discussed, in his 1994 historiographical article on the emergence of visual culture in late medieval and early modern studies, the ‘manner in which the visual is understood as a particular language or discourse related to other languages, which together constitute a common culture’, pre-empting the work of Roberta Gilchrist and Jeffrey F. Hamburger, whose works regarding symbolism within medieval visual culture place what the images *say* amongst what the object *does*.[[251]](#footnote-251) Leslie Ross, in her wide-reaching and impressive survey of Middle Age art, builds upon the idea of the use of symbolism, reflecting on the importance of ‘narrative clarity’ (or ‘getting the message across’) for images meant to ‘teach and inspire’ either a great number of people or a vast illiterate populace.[[252]](#footnote-252)

In an enclosed context, visual symbolism takes on an even greater level of importance, anchoring, influencing and forming the very definitions and understandings of monasticism. As Nancy von Deusen asserted,

‘Monastic life itself exists, among several things, to make the invisible concrete; to make available within the routines of daily life, inner, unseen proclivities, persuasions and the potential for production – that is, the potential for performative realisation.’[[253]](#footnote-253)

The ideas of enclosure, religious dress and marriages to Christ upon their initation into the convent literally but also symbolically mark nuns as distinct and away from the world, and as part of a collective group surrounded and marked by symbolism. ‘Making the invisible concrete’ and creating ‘the potential for performative realisation’ are the cornerstones of monastic symbolist visual culture. They not only create spiritual practices and understandings by themselves, but expand upon themes of devotion through a visual language which is understood on sight. While it is not the purpose of this section to analyse in detail the intricate meanings of each and every symbolic image found across the remaining examples of Dartford, Syon and the Yorkshire Cistercians, this study will attempt a close examination of the repeating symbolism in order to comprehend what this visual language meant and how it was used. Examples of visual material that remain consistently repeat symbolist imagery across different media; supporting and further forming the devotional community through both consciousness and a deeper undercurrent of understanding.

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The context of symbolic images, images that alone appear insignificant, odd or out of place, is essential in understanding how the women religious of Dartford Priory, Syon Abbey and the Yorkshire Cistercians comprehended their visual culture, and what this visual culture meant to each house, order or female English monasticism more generally. The images that surround the MS Rawlinson D. 403’s compassionate imagery woodcuts, for example, despite their level of detail, appear completely without description and to modern eyes, might fail to suggest anything more than a dramatic and crowded border scene.

Each picture, however, adds to the whole narrative context of the scene, illustrating for each viewer the relevance of not only the symbolic element, but its role in stressing the themes of the scene more thoroughly. The Man of Sorrows and *Pietà* are surrounded by images that link to the preceding moments before Crucifixion, illustrating the Easter story in a way that is almost childlike in its simplicity: Christ’s crown of thorns, the reeds, lances and nails, the ‘spitting Jew’, Judas’s treacherous kiss. Others appear perhaps more oblique, but continue this narrative theme: the dice represent the game played by Roman soldiers for Christ’s discarded robe, Pontius Pilate’s basin and water jug, coins representing Judas’ silver payment, a hand held aloft to show the several hands that struck Christ in the humiliating hours before death.[[254]](#footnote-254) In the background of the Pietà, by Jesus’ bowed halo, is a small cluster of flowers which bear strong resemblance to dandelions – growing from large leaves and without petals, they are oval and plain in shape, like a dandelion clock – a flower that was understood as one of the ‘bitter herbs’, representative of the Passion and, in particular, a symbol of Marian grief.[[255]](#footnote-255) There does not appear to be a chronological reading of these images – starting in the top corner, for example, and reading them clockwise to form a sequential story – suggesting meditation on these images was almost an unconscious but all-encompassing experience. The focal point remains the supreme empathetic image, noted not only for being so much greater in size but also in accessibility of what it demonstrates, while the symbolic representations around provide visual texture and depth to the spiritual experience of the female viewers.

In MS Rawlinson D.403’s vibrantly macabre depiction of the Last Judgement, symbols also play a role in enhancing the narrative of the scene. Amidst the grotesque and ghoulish, with a skeleton administering justice with an arrow-lance upon a member of the clergy, smiling, body-less skulls amongst sets of bones and teeth below ground and praying and crying dismembered figures, banners trailing from heraldic angels unfurl with two sets of images: the first appears similar to the border pictures from the *Pietà* and Passion. The dice, a hammer, a thorny crown, a nailed cross – unsurprisingly for woodcuts in the same manuscript, the images are repeated almost identically. Placed next to Christ, shown, even as King of Heaven, as still suffering with bleeding bodily wounds, the crucifixion symbolic imagery furthers and continues the understanding of the Passion, perhaps even placing it within an even broader narrative; that of Christ Triumphant and of the judgement of all humanity.

What is even more striking, however, is the opposite banner – a starker, more linear depiction of a famous late medieval visual trope, the bleeding sacred heart. Unsurprisingly representing Christ, the sacred heart image appears across Europe, and within the limited material for English female monasteries, within the visual material culture of both Dartford and Syon. Linking the Eucharistic belief of mysticism with Christ’s blood and the wine of the mass, Gilchrist argues that this image ‘may be considered especially appropriate to female devotion’, focused so heavily within the devotionally inspiring Mechthild of Hackeborn, one of the only and, as such, hugely important texts in the gifting lists to Swine Priory, and Catherine of Siena.[[256]](#footnote-256) Below the banner, an single capital ‘S’ is written, mirroring the line of inscription beneath the image (‘Arma Beate Birgitte: De Syon’). This reinforces the visual of the devotional links of female saints with both their unique house and, importantly, enforces a symbolic image of Christ’s suffering and sacramental faith amongst the words that describe such events.

The discovery of a sacred heart carving excavated from the site of Dartford Priory furthers this idea of a connected female association with the symbolic heart of Christ, and suggests that such a stone carving was a part of the stone decoration of the Priory building itself. [[257]](#footnote-257) Being seen often and by so many nuns in an enclosed communal space has prompted Gilchrist to assert that ‘the themes and images chosen by religious women show a concern with interiority – inner spaces, inner suffering and even the internal organs of Christ – that accords closely with the ‘interior’ quality of the female body, and the emphasis on enclosure for female religious.’[[258]](#footnote-258) As a symbol, the sacred heart in a devotional community connects the themes of late medieval female-centric spirituality, in a visual and almost viscerally compassionate way, transcending material boundaries to concentrate religious understandings through shared sight and site, through ‘reading the image.’

While for the Yorkshire Cistercians, such evidence of visual material culture might remain out of physical grasp, descriptions remain that further impart symbolic imagery into the everyday lives of the women religious. Walter Skirlaw, Bishop of Durham, described with colourful detail the items he left to his Prioress sister in 1404:

‘One large cup, with a rounded foot, covered… with roses of red and white… and a doe, eagles, lions [and others] carved around the outside, and one fruit tree with one nest and three men seizing chicks from the nest, weighing eighteen marks…[[259]](#footnote-259) A fur cloak with hood and mantle…[[260]](#footnote-260) One bed with a tapestry of a white field with a stag under a great tree and on one side lilies and the other a red border.’[[261]](#footnote-261)

In a will from a bishop, such intricate descriptions were merely to illustrate exactly which item was to go to whom; however, such detail not only indicates an ornate and colourful visual world, but the focus on animals, birds and flowers of huge symbolic importance suggests these were deliberate, choice goods. The symbolism of the twin red and white roses, for example, emblematic of Mary’s dual purity and motherhood through the early medieval doctrine of her Virgin birth, had grown by the fourteenth century into ‘the most important, complex and elaborate motif of medieval art and literature.’[[262]](#footnote-262) Stags, thought to be a symbol of Christ since their appearance in the Psalms, represented the freedom and beauty of a secluded (or enclosed) religious life, characterised by ‘purity and religious aspiration’.[[263]](#footnote-263) The lilies that surround the Christ-like stag represent the saints’ and Mary’s purity and virginity. As a gift to a Cistercian convent, so entwined with Christ and Marian-centric spirituality and so traditionally focused on secluded, strictly enclosed monastic endeavours, the symbolism of these images is hard to ignore. The meanings implicit in the gifts appears to fit within specific ideals of late medieval female spirituality, with this symbolism visually creating communal links not only between the outside clerical world and the nun beneficiary, but, quite unconsciously, between the spiritual worlds of their enclosed female contemporaries.

Often, what appears merely decorative or structural to modern eyes takes on a crucially symbolic dimension when looked at in the context of its surroundings, as Celia Fisher has pointed out: illustrations included are assumed so ‘because they are decorative or because they mean something. These two reasons are not mutually exclusive.’[[264]](#footnote-264) The flowers and foliage symbolism that made up such a vibrant part of these decorated goods continued to be a prominent symbolic illustration throughout the devotional works of both Dartford Priory and Syon Abbey. Within devotional manuscripts, the symbolism of acorns, trailing vines and elaborate foliage is placed to be ‘read’ around the text, not only to adorn some of the most important passages, generally the start of specific chapters, but to instil visually as well as verbally the importance of what was being said.

Having described himself as a vine in John 15:1-2, vineyards represented the communion wine and sacrificial blood of Christ by the fifteenth century, within several of Dartford and Syon’s manuscripts. From the library-central Orchard of Syon to the beautifully toned and illuminated, pinks, gold and blues of Dartford’s Book of Hours, probably once owned by Prioress Alice Braithwaite, vines illustrate and describe some of the most sacred and important of religious treatise. The Dartford Book of Hours displays decorative foliage on the first page of the Office of the Dead, demonstrating a particular level of importance for Dominicans who so value the experience of a good death. The volume, including treatise on the Virgin Mary and Bridget of Sweden’s Revelations, was commissioned by a nun of Dartford, and the extract from the Revelations is the only English text within the rebound and annotated volume, pointing to both heavy use by the nuns because of its subject matter and their autonomy in commissioning a book so fully and vibrantly illustrated.[[265]](#footnote-265)

These symbolic decorations not only illuminate specific passages, functioning as a memory aid and facilitating ease of use, but more importantly, promote these symbolic understandings through visual culture, representing and reflecting what is written in a visual, vibrant way. The quatrefoil structure of the Syon Cope is a continuation of this theme, as it reflects the same assembly as that of contemporary stained glass or contemporary painting. At first glance, the diamond-shaped pictorial sections might appear to be unimportant, but it is in yet another way that the visual material culture of Late medieval religious was instilled within each aspect of enclosed life.

But while these are important, they remain only piecemeal in this study’s analysis of broader visual culture trends within the lives of female religious communities. The buildings of women religious, the remaining structural foundations and material left behind in hasty demolition, allow crucial insights into the physical spaces inhabited by these nuns, understanding the visual material culture that surrounded them and made up their everyday existences. Given the scarcity of sources available, archaeological evidence remains one of the best ways at recreating the physical worlds of the women at Dartford Prioy, Syon Abbey and in particular, the Yorkshire Cistercians, who have had relatively little historiographical attention but have even less material remaining in archives. It was again Roberta Gilchrist’s ground-breaking study of the physical directions each monastic house faced that allows analysis of this symbolic structuring, and how such symbolism fits within and enhanced the spiritual understandings of the women who lived within them.

Taking all female English convents as her study, Gilchrist found a decisive correlation between north-facing cloister buildings with those dedicated to female saints, especially within Yorkshire, suggesting that ‘As an architectural image… the north cloister symbolised an idea... [which] presupposes a contemporary familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through written sources or oral tradition.’[[266]](#footnote-266) Pointing to the correlation between Christian number and shape symbolism of north/south, and identifying patrons and the times of construction, she concluded that their builders intended such distinctions of Marian devotion within physical buildings, with ‘the iconographical and liturgical implications of the Crucifixion and the popularity and chronological suitability of the Coronation suggest that the patrons and designers of the north cloister nunneries may have been alluding to either theme.’[[267]](#footnote-267) It is a structural, architectural pattern that many Yorkshire Cistercian nunneries, alongside Dartford Priory and Syon Abbey, shared. In her study of the Cistercian reform nuns at Weinhausen in the late fifteenth century, Gisela Muschiol asserted similar findings, with the nuns themselves organising a ‘Way of the Cross’ in their own compound, ‘thereby creating the possibility of a spiritual journey.’ Within these buildings, Marian devotion flourished, witnessed through both compassionate imagery and the symbolism of their visual surroundings. The very structure of their cloister impacted upon and affected women religious, promoting the devotional values of the era and connecting all those involved into a symbolic spiritual community.

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In Late Medieval England, women religious witnessed visual symbolism in every aspect of their lives. From the books they read, to the objects they used, to the very buildings in which they lived, religious symbolism structured and instilled into their world a strong devotional understanding. Reading the image provided a deeper level of meaning to their spiritual experiences, focused around a strong, communal and, crucially, visual language reflected on and witnessed, if not always consciously understood, by all.[[268]](#footnote-268) Religious symbolism within the female cloister allowed, in many ways, the transformation of the material into the transcendental, as it imbued the everyday and the ordinary with a strong sense of spiritual connectedness and emotional resonance. It was a visual language that united, challenged and informed the spiritual lives of all those who saw and ‘read’ it.

*The World inside the Cloister: The Secular in English Nuns’ Visual Culture*

Besides receiving the gilded, symbolically-engendered cup and the tapestry-fitted bed, Joan, Prioress of Swine Abbey, received in the same year yet more gifts in the will of a secular noblewoman. Anne St Quentin bequeathed ‘the lady prioress of Swine one silken quilt.’[[269]](#footnote-269) Joan was not alone in receiving such lavish goods. Sixty years before, ‘Aliciae Coyniers [of the monastery of] de Apilton’ was given not only fifteen pounds by Robert de Wodehous, the archdeacon of Richmond, but was also left ‘One long chest, that stands near my bed in York, similarly one cup… with the image of St Michael at the bottom, and one cup of silver (that I had from her as a present), with a hand holding a falcon.’[[270]](#footnote-270) Her contemporary, Julianna de Crofton at Hampole, similarly received ‘six shillings and eight pence and a cloak lined with blue and two writing tablets and one saddle with a harness and two pots of leather.’[[271]](#footnote-271) For women enclosed in arguably the most theoretically isolated convents and order of English nuns, the act of gifting between the cloister and the world reiterates a great deal about the practical communities so many were part of. Yet the goods themselves – so often grand, ornate and seemingly indulgent – present a view of visual material culture that sits uncomfortably with the ideals of, in this case, Cistercian poverty and plainness. These are mostly items not particularly imbued with symbolic Christian relevance, to keep a wandering mind firmly on a Christ-centric path, nor were the decorations a further advancement of spiritual education and understanding, as so much of the compassionate images of Marian devotion appear to be. The majority of these goods are not for the betterment of spiritual life; the visual material culture appears here to be made of luxury goods.

Wills, and the endowments they made upon women religious, are, as started before, essential in understanding and ‘viewing’ the visual material culture of a convent. Though little of what they describe remains in archives, the records describe in almost tangible detail the richness and quality of luxurious goods, suggesting much about not only the visual material culture itself, but of the nature of the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary behind it. In the specific cases of Dartford Priory and the Yorkshire Cistercians, divergent in both wealth and stature, such goods bestowed upon individual members appear equally grand and follow an interesting dynamic of secular-enclosed relationship. Across records of secular-monastic interaction, the visual material culture of women religious appears as one of the most consistent and yet adaptable aspects of exchange, forming a strong theme within this visual culture of the secular and worldly.

Such secular aspects appeared to influence both the visual within the cloister, and the material that derived from and was made by the enclosed. In the building structures and in the sacramental garments that surrounded and guided them, and through the objects bestowed upon them, secular life was visually and materially clear to these women religious, while the material outputs of convents made for the economic health of the house were informed by secular tastes and expectations. In this section, the case-studies of this work will be addressed in order to discover the world inside the cloister, to uncover the connections and distinctions between orders regarding secularism and how it manifested itself within enclosed visual culture.

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Wills bestowing goods to women at Dartford Priory reveal a crucial detail in their exchange and involvement with the secular life to the Yorkshire Cistercians. The material objects found within them remain remarkably similar in their content, if not in their descriptive style, suggesting that from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Dartford came into ownership of such useful and everyday items as candlesticks, brass pots, garments and vestments, as well as vast amounts of land from lay men and women. Crucial, however, was the distribution of money.[[272]](#footnote-272) The fact that money was gifted so often to Dartford for indulgences and as bestowed gifts suggests an interesting comparison in itself. The economic uncertainties and difficulties faced by the women of the Yorkshire Cistercians, as demonstrated in Dissolution visitation reports, are clear; it appears that monetary donations were not made, despite their seeming need. The giving of gifts appears to be more individualistic in tone, with singular items – choice items – bestowed upon single women, not the convent as a whole. This does not appear to be the case regarding Dartford and Syon, where such secular connections make donations of both communal and separate value. This is perhaps to do with the supreme interconnected-ness of local community with the spiritual services of the Kent and Middlesex houses; chapter one discusses the wide-ranging and famous devotional integrity and output of both these convents. Even then, however, in the case of Roos Pitt, whose will is dated in 1470, money is left (thirteen shillings and four pence) to Jone Stockton to pray for her soul, suggesting a personal gift, rather than to the entire convent.[[273]](#footnote-273)

Silvia Evangelisti has touched upon this contrasting dimension in her work on early modern Florentine nuns, suggesting that while ‘scholars have discussed the meanings of the material dimension of the nuns’ life rather less often [than their convents and family strategies]’ the giving of a specific object, a particular item chosen for a specific individual, meant that ‘their symbolic meaning was all the more relevant.’[[274]](#footnote-274) As singular nuns individually acquired goods from the outside world, this ‘naturally created an unequal distribution of goods amongst them that favoured some nuns above others.’[[275]](#footnote-275) Using Evangelisti’s findings from an Italian perspective, perhaps a similar analysis can be attempted with regards to Yorkshire Cistercians – it appears that material goods, items that made up and furthered the visual material worlds of these enclosed religious women, were simply a more personal form of donation. If, for Italian nuns, ‘material objects… were fundamental elements in the game of social representation, personal prestige and power which took place within the convent walls as well as outside of them,’ the very tangibility of the object not only strengthened ties between the secular and religious worlds, but allowed for a hugely personal reflection of the giver and the receiver, each understanding the significance and weight of any visual material object.[[276]](#footnote-276) To say that the secular was important to the enclosed is, of course, unnecessary; the first chapter has stated how practically involved both sections of community were, with patterns of patronage suggested as consistent and often very strong.In terms of visual material culture, however, the donations of local men and women bring the secular into the cloister in a very real, tangible way, consciously cementing secular relationships and bringing the secular world firmly into everyday enclosed use through the visual and material.

The materiality of such goods that make up their visual culture informs the secular connections and associations through their donation. While quality cannot be determined merely from what is written, the evocation in the donations to the Yorkshire Cistercians from their wealthier friends is clear and frequently luxurious. Though the Dominican, Bridgettine and Cistercian Rules strictly observe doctrines of poverty, with the latter especially stringent about cloister decoration for spiritual benefit: ‘No stone or wooden towers for bells shall be of an immoderate height, so as to be unbecoming the simplicity of the order. Let there be no notable superfluity… the linen of the altars and the vestments… shall be without silk and gold fringe’. It appears as though women of the Yorkshire convents did not adhere so strongly in their acceptance of secular gifts.[[277]](#footnote-277)

In visitation records, the inhabitants are frequently chastised for their reliance of such comforts, and, in a contemporary Yorkshire house, an archdeacon forbids any of its nuns ‘to use silk clothes, especially not silken veils nor valuable furs, nor rings on their fingers, not tunics pleated…or with brooches… after the fashion of secular women.’[[278]](#footnote-278) The idea that secular visual material culture so acutely influenced the personal presentation of women religious says something very definitive in itself about the physical proximity that some nuns had with those outside. In 1534, the visitation records of Archbishop Lee to Sinningthwaite reveal his giving a licence to the women, whose convent was in such economic dire straits, so that they could sell their jewels for £15.[[279]](#footnote-279) In isolation, these donations and their obvious use appear to suggest that the Yorkshire nuns, from gaining a taste for luxury and secular involvement in their material lives, fit the mould of undisciplined women religious that has stereotyped them since the medieval period.

But this simplistic analysis does not allow for an understanding of *why* such garments and goods were donated in the first place. Arguably, in some cases, it was because such convents were short of the type of good needed: in the early fourteenth century, Sinninghtwaite had been discovered by its archbishop to have been relying on relatives and friends for clothing provisions, as convent finances were not fulfilling this requirement.[[280]](#footnote-280) Friendship and familial relationships went both ways; wills and endowments by nuns suggest secular closeness from inside-out of the cloister – the silver cup given to Alice Conyers of Nunappleton was, as stated by the gentleman bestowing the present, ‘which I had of her gift.’ More particularly, however, the nature of nearly all goods bestowed – beds, pots, candlesticks, books, cloths, vestments, cups, saddles, bridles, bowls – is inherently domestic. The vast majority of records recall items that were potentially very beautiful, very ornate and generally very valuable, and were more items in the majority that were useful to a group of women in their every-day cloistered lives. For English women religious, such secular-given items made and furthered their visual material culture, by bridging the enclosed gap between their unworldliness and those outside. For their benefactors, it appears that domesticity, and by extension, the material goods that made up their visual culture, was a sure and secure way of furthering and improving links of friendship and support with and within the cloister.

Similarly, the output and production of needlework furthered secular and enclosed relationships through visual material. Monasteries of Yorkshire Cistercians were fundamentally tied up with the materiality of financial life; wool, produced in the hilly and exposed Yorkshire landscape, was a major (and potentially one of the only) economic outputs of these women, with Hampole, Rosedale, Swine, Wickham and Ellerton recorded, alongside several Yorkshire contemporary monastic houses and female convents, as farming and distributing it.[[281]](#footnote-281) It further appears that for the women of Wkyeham, chastised in a Archbishop visitation in 1314, that they were spending too much time on their needlework; they were to spend less time *operis de serico* (working with silk) when they should be occupied with ‘divine service.’[[282]](#footnote-282) This activity appears, additionally, to not be limited to these Yorkshire women. Antiquarian John Dunkin, in tracing the will of Roos Pitt (who, as already stated, gave women of Dartford Priory money and domestic items in her will), suggested that her brother’s family, the Groverstes, were not only intimately linked with the Priory, but that within their oratory, a tapestry ‘said to be worked by those ladies’ was used for decoration.[[283]](#footnote-283) Both, albeit sparse, but telling examples suggest that with regards to visual and material culture, English women religious had and exercised choice, flair and agency to create and potentially to distribute, forming friendships and strengthening links of patronage.

Such needlework, unlike European contemporary examples, only survives through these snatched written glimpses. Throughout this chapter, much has been made of the fact that so little material evidence survives, in physical form, of the visual culture of these women religious. This is undoubtedly true, and to attempt examination of the buildings themselves, and to understand their enclosed space, it becomes necessary to turn to archaeological evidence, comparisons from male or European houses, or to read antiquarian descriptions, rather than being able to see, touch and visit the convents of this and other studies. In a small parish church in the East Riding of Yorkshire, just outside Hull’s town centre, however, are some of the only enduring pieces of architecture of all English female monasticism, and furthermore are some of the most remarkable and strange pieces of monastic visual culture evidence across the country.

The Swine misericords, now belonging to St Mary’s in Swine-in-Holderness, are the only physical remainders of the greatest female Cistercian convent in Yorkshire, saved before the Priory’s demolition. The dating of them remains a difficulty; there do not appear to be any written documents relating to the installation or patronisation of these misericords, and scholarship presents further confusion.[[284]](#footnote-284) The dating of them around the end of the fifteenth century towards the turn of the sixteenth century, however, holds sway, with their ‘elegant simplicity’ stated alongside their probable ‘simplicity for economy’s sake’.[[285]](#footnote-285) The carvings would have been done by a local craftsman, and, while there is no evidence of the nuns being involved or patronising the carvings, the images themselves, as this study will present, demonstrates full connections with the local secular community over the course of two centuries.

Assmann’s understanding of ‘communicative memory’ and the later ‘cultural memory’ informs this research into these remembered connections and events; though the carving of these misericords was done so far after the events of which they could be a reflection, the ‘social bonds and frames’ of ‘traditions of communication and thematization and… the affective ties that bind together families groups and generations’ is arguably present in their creation.[[286]](#footnote-286) As the events and anecdotes about clergy and nuns behaviours become more remote, it appears that the need to ‘institutionalise’ this information starts to exist. Events are no longer ‘committed to everyday communication’ and instead must be bound in material forms of ‘songs, dances, rituals, masks, symbols.’[[287]](#footnote-287)

Misericords themselves were not on general display in the cloister Church – hidden from view as a bracket on the underside of choir stalls, they were first introduced ‘as a concession to monks and canons who were too old or weak to stand.’[[288]](#footnote-288) The fact that they were not on obvious display, though, does not discount their role within these nuns’ visual culture. Not only does their ornate carving prove ‘the medieval desire for all-encompassing decoration’, but *what* they display supports the idea that the images would have been read and interpreted by the nuns in certain ways.[[289]](#footnote-289) The idea that the nuns had to consciously seek out the misericords, rather than simply visually absorb them in everyday life, adds further mystery to their meaning. The fact that they would be seen potentially only on days of sacramental importance, or perhaps even on a quite subconscious level, only adds to the impressive quality of what remains so completely intact and to the intriguing nature of what they mean. As Hardwick suggests, ‘the images thus discovered may indeed, as they are often characterised, be ‘marginal’ but their tantalising, semi-hidden location nevertheless has the almost paradoxical effect of drawing particular attention to the contents of these margins.’[[290]](#footnote-290)

When knowing the proximity to women religious, and to the most sacred space of the choir in their church, these carved images appear to modern eyes to be particularly bizarre and potentially, given their context, shocking even. A face of a nun whose mouth appears to be sprouting or being stuffed with foliage; a young woman wearing an elaborate contemporary headdress, but little else; a half moon face, partially veiled and flanked by griffins; two separate male faces, with pronounced, spiked and forked beards; a (crowned?) man looking through his upturned legs, startlingly exposing his genitals; a curved grotesque made up of wings, a fish tail and with donkey ears, wearing a bishop’s mitre – all make up the reasonably innocuous part of the choir stall in a female convent’s Cistercian, late medieval church.[[291]](#footnote-291)

More surprisingly, perhaps, is the fact that these are not by any means exceptional – in fact, as Christa Grossinger discovered in her wide-reaching study, if anything, these are wholly standard: ‘Not only was the profane subject-matter the norm for misericords, but it could be shockingly obscene [too].’[[292]](#footnote-292) Images of men and women behaving badly, of devils and animals and mythical creatures, of bare bottoms and kissing figures and the clergy, made up this mysterious visual world of church misericords, found across England, over gendered, Order-ed, geographical and enclosed/secular lines. Broadly, the horrible and the comical mingled in order to create a broad late medieval visual culture of mutual and contemporary significance – what Grossinger calls ‘iconographical conventions’, just like a the marginal illustrations in the Somerset manuscript -become recognised as common symbols of daily life, understood by both the enclosed and those in the world.[[293]](#footnote-293) Grossinger points out that perhaps such carvings ‘[served] the needs of the clergy during long, tedious hours of prayer’ – but the same case might be made for the enclosed women religious, too.[[294]](#footnote-294)

For the nuns of Swine Abbey, and, presumably, for their contemporary sisters in other Yorkshire Cistercian convents, Dartford Priory and Syon Abbey, the visual imagery of male genitalia, bare-shouldered laywomen and bizarre, animal-shaped grotesques were not quite the norm across their visual and material cultures more generally. What stands out, in fact, is the worldly aspects of these hidden treasures, introducing a subversive element into what so far has remained a visual culture rich with religious symbolism and compassionate devotional imagery. So what, exactly, were the needs of these women during their time within church? The purpose of this section is to examine exactly what this secular dimension of misericords meant for the female viewers. To do so, the history Swine Priory shared with their local outside community must be examined, to understand what those commissioning the misericords might have intended their meanings to be, and what such works might have signified to their female viewers.

The outlandish display of masculine physicality found within the carving of a man looking through his bare legs, for example, might appear to make a comment about the presumed moral state of the convent. Throughout the early fourteenth century, reports of sexual immorality within and including Swine Priory plagued the clerical records – stories of nuns’ incontinence with both monks and secular men were reported, resulting in, seemingly, much hand-wringing from the clergy in charge, who frequently issued commissions and decrees to prevent such behaviour.[[295]](#footnote-295) Paul Hardwick suggests that such ‘in your face’ extremes of male exposure in English misericords is not so much what Ruth Mellinkoff claims was meant to ‘fulfil an apotropaic function [of] driving away dark forces’, but was rather a result of this ‘feared Other’, threatening the enclosed sisters with ‘something rather more tangible in the earthly realm than the infernal demons who are also to be found in the shadows beneath the choir stalls.’[[296]](#footnote-296)

Though Anderson draws many parallels between the carving of certain imagery with Old Testament images and the subjects of medieval romances, the idea that the carvers of misericords were influenced heavily by public life around them, of domestic lives and scenes of labour, remains prominent.[[297]](#footnote-297) The fact that these images were very much a choice, a reflection on the world and events around them, are vital to their interpretations, both modern and contemporary: ‘What the misericords offer us is the visual equivalent of medieval small talk, with its abundant vitality, coarse humour and sardonic comments on the abuses of the age, precisely those elements which are necessary to complete out understanding of any period and with which the written record of the Middle Ages supplies us so poorly.’[[298]](#footnote-298) The image of an undressed woman, then, ‘pretending’ at respectability with her clothed head and the almost phallic-shaped pointed beard of one of the individual male busts supports this, potentially aimed at ‘stunning’ the nuns, whose thoughts, like their forebears, had strayed ‘down the slippery slope of un-chastity.’[[299]](#footnote-299) The image of the veiled moon might, similarly, be read as a medieval symbol both related to the Virgin in Revelations, as ‘a woman clothed with the Sun, the Moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars’; this Marian image was an already heavily invoked patron of the Yorkshire Cistercians and in late medieval spirituality across lay and enclosed lines, and more generally, as a symbol of female sexuality, purity and menstruation.[[300]](#footnote-300)

Furthermore, the practical connections between the nuns of Swine Priory and their surrounding male-dominated parish Church and contemporary monasteries appear in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to have been decisively uneasy, if not marked by out and out hostility. Janet Burton has addressed this difficult relationship through the legal battles actively in which the nuns of Swine Priory engaged in the early thirteenth century, involving one particular dispute between local monks over the building of a water-dyke in their land, which would have meant they were ‘territorially side-lined’, and which culminated in monastic body-snatching and burial by the nuns at their Priory.[[301]](#footnote-301) Their independence and initiative in these cases appears to be what Burton convincingly states, that ‘the nuns had always held the reins of power at Swine.’

Up into the fifteenth century, interference from superior male clergy seems to have been a staple of communications between Swine nuns and their clerical contemporaries. Forbidden to make new lease of their land or rents on their property, to take presumably paying boarders or, fitting nicely with the fashionable gifting previously asserted, ‘to use supertunics, barred girdles… outwardly or inwardly cut, or ornamented in a curious fashion,’ by their archbishop between 1306-1319.[[302]](#footnote-302) In terms of the parish church itself, which shared so many spiritual and practical communal ties with these nuns, the relationship was also not always a harmonious one, with records of 1308 demonstrating the neglect by their archbishop, in failing to provide a perpetual vicar for their parish church.[[303]](#footnote-303) It was not for another fifteen years that such a role was permanently filled. In 1335, furthermore, a male *conversus* of Swine Priory was transferred from the convent due to his excesses.[[304]](#footnote-304)

In terms of the hidden yet bizarre misericords, then, the images portrayed take on a more pronounced meaning. The misericord showing a half-fish, half-bird wearing a hat synonymous with Church authority appears, in light of their disputes, to be nothing short of a critique or strong-minded judgement on the clergy who had let down their parishioners and tried to curtail these nuns’ everyday, practical and economic exchange and livelihoods; such a small local community would have employed a local craftsmen to make these images.[[305]](#footnote-305) The forked, pointed beards mirror a fashion for men that lasted into the fifteenth century, with the image here perhaps meant to display the secular associations of men who they were battling and whose associations were causing problems for these enclosed women.[[306]](#footnote-306) The face of the nun with her mouth blocked by foliage is, furthermore, arguably a comment on the enforcement of rules and restrictions on women who were clearly not for backing down.

While it is very difficult to discern either the direct meanings behind these carvings, or how they were read by their late medieval viewers, it seems likely that the context of both their secular disquiet and temptations with their enclosed female viewers inform visual culture, as it offers reminders and comments upon their shared past. Regarding the mitre-wearing grotesque, Grossinger convincingly suggests that this expression ‘in scatological manner’ stands for the ‘corruption of the Church’, a feeling of general but particularly in Swine’s case, of local late medieval understanding. This ‘reaction to the Church’s persistent preaching on the dangers of the flesh’, in the context of the nuns’ sex scandals, Church corruption, neglect and disharmony between the nuns and their male contemporaries and superiors, seems difficult to ignore when the links between visual material culture and female religious are deeply and equally entwined.[[307]](#footnote-307)

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The intrinsic connections between the secular world and enclosed life manifested themselves in the visual culture. The warnings and subversive comments within the misericords, the domestic nature of the involvement between secular gifting and exchange and the links through needlework with self-expression and economic advantage all lend the visual material culture of women religious deeper understandings of secular life, as well as reflect their engagement with communities outside of their cloister walls. Inside their convents, the women of Syon Abbey, Dartford Priory and those of the Yorkshire Cistercians are surrounded by and create not only their devotional and symbolic selves, but images that reflect, understand, warn and imply secular understandings of themselves, and of the outside world. The use of secular imagery within and by a cloister addresses more acutely than any other theme of their visual culture expressed the way in which material and image fulfilled conceptions of enclosure and exposure.

*Conclusions*

Though little evidence of the visual worlds of English women religious survives, their visual culture can, through a comparative study across their nation and with their German contemporaries, be seen in vivid detail. While reflecting and demonstrating the broader trends within late medieval art and religiosity, often the visual culture of these enclosed women is used uniquely, to form the communities of women religious through conscious and more oblique means. Bringing together the symbols of the broader piety of the age, the visual culture of women religious is refracted through their status as enclosed monastics, as Dominicans, Cistercians and Bridgettines, and as late medieval women more generally. Furthermore the visual culture of English women religious is neither passive nor simply accepted wisdom. When looking comparatively at German nuns, the autonomy, personal choice and commitment to certain styles formed just as much a part of the visual culture as did broader trends, with these women acknowledging too the significance of what could be seen.

The effective piety of the Pietàs, the Man of Sorrows and the imagery of Crucifixion in women religious’ visual culture both corresponds with and supports the more general trends of the *Devotio moderna* and the emotional, affecting rhetoric of female saints. It does, however, go even further. In establishing these images as the emotional core of worship, private prayer and personal study, of the religious community as a whole, the image of Christ’s grieving mother or an emaciated, deeply human God become intrinsic to the religious character and understandings of late medieval nuns. The emotional resonance of the compassionate image and the lyrical rhetoric are always intended to go beyond the decorative, but for women religious, seeing and feeling the images do not just support the religious experience, but they both become and perpetuate their communal devotional feeling and practice within the cloister.

Linked intrinsically to this is the symbolic image; often corresponding to the empathetic illustration, symbols illuminate the religious experience of nuns through the creation of a visual language more accessible and more frequently asserted across enclosed/secular lines than texts. Placing them within a truly continent-wide community of belief, symbolic imagery lent women religious understanding of the self through conscious and even unconscious means; the very world in which they inhabited – their dress, their stone surroundings and even the structure and direction of their cloister – related to a system of imagery that could be read and accessed by all, yet interpreted in many ways.

The last element of visual culture for women religious, the secular aspects of gifting material culture and being surrounded with deeply secular images, lends yet another aspect to their communal understandings of cloistered life. Their roles as late medieval women and their places within networks of gifting, exchange and beneficiaries, were not diminished by entering the religious life, but appears to have been enhanced by it. In comparison to contemporary Italian nuns, gifting of secular material culture that includes descriptions found within relevant symbolism only heightens the awareness of visual culture as being essential to the formation of cloister communities and in forming and developing relationships with the outside world. The stone misericords, while unrepresentative of our case-studies, offers an insight into the world of visual culture potentially influenced by the women themselves.

Though so little evidence survives, the visual material culture of English women religious remains one of the most vibrant aspects of their enclosed lives. Reflecting their enclosed status, their order and their spirituality, visual material culture brought together and merged the many strands of cloistered and external life, reflecting communal connections and patronage links. At the same time, the shape, structure and decoration of their cloister, the rhetoric used within their manuscripts, their presentation of the liturgy and the presentation of themselves actively informed their devotional lives, their relationships within and outside the cloister, and the ideals and understandings of the future women in their convent.

***Chapter Three: Lineage, Materiality and Resistance: Community during Dissolution***

*Introductions*

In April 1537, Sir Brian Hastings, wrote to Thomas Cromwell regarding the Suppression of Hampole Priory. Entreating Cromwell ‘to be so good [a] lorde unto one pore house of Nunes called Hampole, whiche are neare neighburs unto me,’ Hastings attempted to alert Cromwell to the virtues of the convent’s inhabitants: ‘and of good name, fame and rule, and so reputed and taken amonges all the Cuntry aboute me.’[[308]](#footnote-308) In doing so, he attempted to prevent their dissolution, because ‘as yet they have not ther confirmacione that they have not bene of abilitie for to serve’, believing it better for them ‘to remayne and stande and have more religious women assigned unto them.’[[309]](#footnote-309) Hastings went on to promise that, if their exemption from Suppression is granted, the nuns of Hampole ‘wyll be… daily bedwomen… to your good lordshipe.’[[310]](#footnote-310) The previous year, Sir John Neville also made his own feelings about the Cistercian priory plain to Cromwell. On hearing that, if the nunnery was to be suppressed, it was ‘Ser Thomas Wyntwort, knight marscall, [that would] hathe grant of the kyngys hygnes of the priore of Ampall’, Neville made the case for the land and building to go instead to his son-in-law Gerves Clyfton, who ‘schal fynd sufficient surete for the perfrymacion of all syche comandys ows you schall demand of hym.’[[311]](#footnote-311)

These letters are part of only a handful which remain, if there were ever any more, of the letters from aristocratic families regarding the Suppression of the Yorkshire Monasteries. Sir Brian Hastings’s request was granted, but only for a short time. Despite their acquisition of five new recruits between the Minor and Major Suppressions (either novices or those from previously closed houses) and of their being the second wealthiest (though still, regionally relatively poor) nunnery in the county, Hampole was dismissed in 1539. Sir John Neville’s request was similarly fruitless; when the nuns had left, the convent building and pasture passed to William FitzWilliam, secretary to the Earl of Southampton [another William FitzWilliam, incidentally], in the early 1540s.[[312]](#footnote-312) Of the five requests made to Thomas Cromwell to receive land once belonging to the Yorkshire Cistercians, only one was successful, with the rest being gifted by the king to local gentry with the buildings, generally, being torn down for the raw material gain of the Crown.

The nature and language of these letters – as mildly grating as it might appear to modern ears – is, perhaps, nothing new in letters asking favours from the most important person in the king’s council. Even the quick clambering of men to be awarded with the material spoils of the dissolution of the monasteries does not appear surprising, especially in light of the ‘Great Plunder’ narrative of scholarship: W G Hoskins remarked that “the major impact of the Dissolution was the transference of monastic lands and spiritual possession to the Crown and their subsequent disposal to a select minority of eager subjects.”[[313]](#footnote-313) Regarding the distribution of convents across Yorkshire, Hoskins asserted that the gentry were the main benefactors of royal monastic generosity, and just over a century later in 1642, over one quarter of these gentry families owned property sold and distributed by the Crown. The fact that only the Earl of Westmoreland achieved anything in this so-called ‘scramble’ for monastic lands after two letters and hedging his bets somewhat, making reference to Keldholme and his eventual gift, Rosedale, in two separate letters, is demonstrative of the difficulties faced in the ex-monastic property market.[[314]](#footnote-314)

Yet for Sir Brian Hastings and Sir John Neville, their connections to their prospective monasteries were based upon more than a mere desperate or greedy smash-and-grab for more land. Hampole Priory held an important place for both parties, each connected through family ties to the original founders, William de Clarefai and Avice de Tany, centuries before. Both Gervase Clifton and Hastings were descended from the prominent mid-fourteenth-century family of FitzWilliam, themselves only generations away from the founding couple. The other writers of letters making claims for female monastic land and property in the region, similarly, had far-reaching familial connections to the small and poor houses and their original patrons several centuries before. The practical communal connections between Hastings and Hampole Priory are clarified through his efforts to save both their physical home and the female religious community within. Neville, furthermore, attempted a renegotiation of power over the community, the demonstrative proof of their [spiritual] heritage. For Hastings and Neville, Hampole Priory represented more than a useful acquisition of land, no matter how big an incentive that proved to be – it held and demonstrated the strongest of communal links with their religious and socially-constructed past.

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The Dissolution of the monasteries has, as this study has previously mentioned, been something of a stumbling block for scholars of sixteenth-century English monasticism. Presenting a solid, periodising break that few other European countries experienced, the Dissolution is, as asserted by Deidre O Sullivan, for many, ‘the definitive closure with the medieval world.’[[315]](#footnote-315) David Knowles lamented scholarship that has treated the Henrician reign as ‘the moment of transit between the medieval centuries and the modern world,’ side-lining the Suppression to ‘backward glances’ that made it ‘either inevitable or at least desirable.’[[316]](#footnote-316) It is not difficult to imagine the Suppression as such a decisive end; the Marian reinstatement lasted barely a year before England was again without enclosed monasticism, and even during this time, only a handful of suppressed monastic houses (including, as previously mentioned, only two female houses) had the physical numbers, the enduring prestige and the inclination to be reinstated. Nuns had neither the legal ability to renounce their vows of chastity and marriage or return home to their families – although, as we will see, this was not necessarily so in the case of the women discussed in this chapter. The monasteries and abbeys that filled the landscape and provided sites of pilgrimage and spiritual reflection for centuries were destroyed or mutilated, changed beyond recognition and deprived of the materials they contained. A society, as G. W. Bernard stated, ‘in which there are no monks and nuns and no pilgrimage to holy places is qualitatively different’ to that which went before it.[[317]](#footnote-317)

Yet the Dissolution is not an overriding and concrete end/beginning. Studies of recusant families and ex-women religious, with some remaining in quasi-monastic groups, negate this notion that the institutional Dissolution changed the very fabric of societal belief and somehow finished off the lives of the women who had been part of an enclosed, centuries-long tradition. The ways in which the Dissolution has most often been addressed, through legal and institutional frameworks and from the perspectives of the king and his court, have not been conducive to understanding the developments from a communal and female religious viewpoint. Historians (of whom Coulton and Knowles are strong examples), have frequently worked from the male monastic perspective, addressing the Dissolution in a way that further marginalises women and the female religious experience. Clark’s work on the intellectual history of the Dissolution further addressed only male houses, so while it excellently drew out the intellectual reasoning of Dissolution and places it within these narratives, it relegated women through their lack of sources and therefore their inability to fit within these frameworks.[[318]](#footnote-318) Before this can be addressed, however, the place of the Suppression of the monasteries within scholarship of the English Reformation must be addressed, outlining the existing contexts and understandings of this event.

The traditional view of the Dissolution with regards to women religious, as mentioned in the introduction, has primarily focused on legal and governmental records that suggest poor household management and bad behaviour. In this reading, female monasticism went out very much with a whimper, not a bang; it was seen as a result of internal immorality and external apathy. It is largely viewed in light of the whole English Reformation, assumed in these discussions to be ‘both inevitable and natural.’[[319]](#footnote-319) This interpretation of a ‘swift and sure Protestant transformation that swept all of England’ is supported by authorities of this ‘old-school’ like A. G. Dickens, suggesting more widely that ‘English Catholicism [up into the 1530s], despite its gilded decorations, was an old, unseaworthy and ill-commanded galleon, scarcely able to continue its voyage without the new seamen and shipwrights produced (but produced too late in the day) by the Counter-Reformation.’[[320]](#footnote-320)

It was this Whiggish, ‘progress’-led narrative that preserved well into the 1980s. The older histories that offered a ‘progress’ narrative of the Protestant Reformation throughout England have been firmly confronted and thoroughly challenged by ‘Revisionists’ in the last twenty-five years, who argued that there was a top-down implementation of the Reformation upon English society before a more general acceptance later in the sixteenth century. In his review article addressing the historiographical state of play in this field in 2006, Eamon Duffy suggested that ‘Almost everyone now agrees that “although there were some English people excited about Protestantism in Henry VIII’s reign, there was not much popular support for a change,” despite which “over the course of three generations the way the English worshipped… and related to their place in the universe underwent a sea change.”’[[321]](#footnote-321) Melissa Franklin Harkrider recently argued for a change in emphasis within English Reformation studies, not just addressing ‘the nature and scope of reform,’ but rather, and crucially for the understanding of Tudor England in the mid-1530s to 1550s, ‘how men and women accommodated themselves to it.’[[322]](#footnote-322) While the old-fashioned views of medieval England as either urgently waiting for or decisively not wanting the Reformation have been shaped more subtly and with greater understanding of conflicting identities and ideas by this Revisionist ‘school’ (though Duffy was at pains to point out that such a unified group never existed), their assessment of the Dissolution appears slightly less comprehensive. Duffy wrote: ‘Many aspects of the English Reformation have been reappraised in recent decades, but the Dissolution is rarely brought into play in these revisionist historical projects… still [studied] almost entirely from the perspective of Tudor government.’[[323]](#footnote-323)

Ethan H. Shagan suggested that the Dissolution ‘has been almost wholly divorced from the Reformation as a spiritual process,’ remarking that ‘Haigh has limited his discussion of the dissolution to a few examples of resistance… and a few other scattered references,’ whereas Duffy ‘declined to discuss monasteries almost entirely, limiting his analysis to ‘the parish setting’ in order to save space.’[[324]](#footnote-324) The more practical elements of the Suppression have, however, been addressed in considerably more detail: Margaret Bowker made interesting and thorough statistical claims in her work on the Henrician Reformation and the parish clergy when addressing the fortunes of ex-monks and claims to land distribution changing in light of the Suppression, but her hypothesis unfortunately does not extend to ex-nuns or the property once belonging to nunneries.[[325]](#footnote-325) The popular uprisings against and discontent with the Dissolution, furthermore, have been assessed by D. M. Palliser as having a strong pastoral and religious sensibility, as he asserted that ‘the attack on the religious houses [as touching] more directly on everyday life, and one need not take a romantic view of them to see a close connection between their Suppression and radical religious attitudes.’[[326]](#footnote-326) In the case of those less inclined to radical resistance to the Suppression, however, historians have often made the claim that the aristocracy and gentry were greedy and ‘grabbing’ in their attempts to get their hands on whatever monastic land was available, whereas only a handful of scholars, including Benjamin Thompson, in his seminal essay on founders and patrons of male religious houses at the Dissolution, have engaged with this issue in any greater depth.

In other disciplines, the ‘problem’ of studying the Dissolution in context remains unsolved. From an archaeological perspective, O’Sullivan described this difficulty in the case of ‘functionalist’ approaches: “[they] frequently echo these [inevitable and natural] sentiments, with excavations often presenting monastic demolition zones as practical recycling centres, in which superfluous building materials are discarded and buried on the basis of ‘common sense’ rationale, or otherwise positively deployed to meet contemporary social needs or ambitions.’[[327]](#footnote-327) The ruins and remains, she continued, are often seen as part of a ‘Cromwellian’ vision that fits within the ‘strongly embedded…though rarely as crudely expressed’ discourse in English Reformation writing.[[328]](#footnote-328)

The physical reminders of the Dissolution on the English landscape have themselves been subject to important consideration. Mick Aston’s study addressed the ruins of monasteries as sites of influence in the context of eighteenth-century antiquarianism and memory, and as mentioned in the previous chapter, the compelling case put forward by Margaret Aston suggested that the ruins, far from advancing the governmentally-enforced themes of Catholic extravagance and gluttony, were instead regarded as ‘the very worst of Protestant excesses.’[[329]](#footnote-329) Yet while these narratives support the more nuanced views of a society in which diverse spiritual identifications were to be found, the idea that such remnants were an intended part of the Dissolution remains harder to negotiate. Scholarship based around the Suppression broadly remains fixed within the narrative of ‘top-down’, governmentally-enforced Dissolution, and in doing so, runs the risks of repeating and reinforcing existing narratives.

The emphasis on the material culture of monasticism and its Suppression, however, is an exciting and growing area of historiography, but usually falls, as so often heard before, across gendered lines. So few visible physical remnants of English female monasticism remain on the landscape, that, by (albeit limited) contrast, male houses remain more prominent; this has created a further methodological division in viewing these ruins as memory-makers and opinion-formers. Such difficulties in existing frameworks and methodologies prompted Shagan to report that while ‘It has long been known that the legal dissolution of the English monasteries was followed by the physical destruction of the houses themselves… This destructive process, for all its intrinsic interest, has been more of a minefield than a gold mine for scholars seeking to understand popular involvement with and attitudes towards the English Reformation.’[[330]](#footnote-330)

Involving both the complete destruction of the physical monasteries, as well as the preservation of certain monastic ruins, iconoclasm in Tudor England is another field of historiography that this chapter will touch upon, and, as is perhaps unsurprising, deals both narrowly and at length with the Suppression of the monasteries. Seen as the beginning of governmentally-enforced iconoclasm, historians have frequently drawn parallels in the construction of public memory and consciousness between the destruction of monasticism in its most literal and physical sense and the same actions of reforming zeal of breaking images. Helen L Parish concluded that ‘the destruction of the cult of saints, the Dissolution and official iconoclasm in the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI changed both the physical appearance of the English church and the nature of its relationship with the past.’[[331]](#footnote-331)

Writing from an art history perspective, Roger Homan drew barely any ideological distinction between the Dissolution (‘the iconoclasm over which Cromwell presided was venomous and its chroniclers in our own time (Rowse, Duffy, Graham-Dixon) are unfailing in noting the spirit of hatred which sustained it’) and the Puritanical iconoclasm that followed nearly a century later (‘In particular, the rejection of the authority of the Pope in the 1530s led to a desire for cultural independence. Puritan iconoclasm was, in its most rational expression, a form of anti-popery.’)[[332]](#footnote-332) Keith Thomas similarly began his history of iconoclasm with the Dissolution – ‘English iconoclasm made a spectacular beginning in the late 1530s with the dissolution, and the wholesale demolition [of the monasteries]’ – before approaching the wider, near-contemporary destruction of relics and places of pilgrimages such as the Lady of Walsingham and the tomb of (later proscribed by Henry VIII) St Thomas Becket.[[333]](#footnote-333)

In a European context, examples of iconoclasm further inform the idea of Reformation on the ground, colouring wider interpretations of communal life with the religious. Carlos M. N. Eire, in his study of Swiss iconoclasm, affirmed that image-breaking was not only ‘the most visible change brought about by the radical crisis of the sixteenth century, but also one of the most radical and “democratic.”’[[334]](#footnote-334) He went on to suggest that iconoclasm was responsible for ‘the complete destruction of the Catholic cult within a community,’ and that this outcome of the destruction of images was ‘in a very real sense, the triumph of the Reformation.’[[335]](#footnote-335) The idea of image-breaking democratising the Reformation, and giving voice to reforming religious zeal, appears in an early sixteenth-century European context to be sound, but as far as its impact on visual culture and spiritual understanding more widely is concerned, Bob Scribner suggested that this is something of a misconception: ‘encapsulated’ in the idea that “the Reformation was a shift from an image culture to a word culture.”’[[336]](#footnote-336) The 1536 legislation that attempted to suppress ‘the common practice of praying to saints for their intercessory power’, followed by the ensuing destruction of statuary by government officials, is quoted as evidence of both the Henrician attempt to state his Church of England authority and this changing spiritual emphasis, but does not appear to have affected any of the parish churches related to Yorkshire nunneries, or Dartford and Syon.[[337]](#footnote-337) As stated in the previous chapter, the visual culture of a convent was both a result of and a former of their local and devotional communities, and remained so into the Dissolution.

The Dissolution as a form of iconoclasm might, then, appear to have persuaded those whose focus lies primarily at the other side of the monastic Suppression; the fundamental breaking of the image of monasticism within a country so visually dominated by monasteries and convents seems to offer a strong, poetic argument for it being the beginning of the reaction against Catholic imagery. However, in the context of the troubles of identifying the governmentally-enforced destruction of monastic buildings, while leaving so many to gentry and aristocracy keen to inhabit and benefit from them, a note of caution should be observed before accepting these claims for all religious houses across the nation. The understanding of the physical place of some of the enacted ruins, and correspondingly, what was left untouched, remains a line of enquiry rarely worked upon, but one that could reveal much about the priorities of both the government and those in receipt of these ex-monastic buildings.

In terms of the case-studies of this work, the Dissolution both destroyed and maintained the physical remains of the nunneries. Both Syon Abbey and Dartford Priory were spared the same fate as Fountains or Roche Abbey, instead beginning new ‘lives’ after being gifted within the king’s royal circle. The houses of the Yorkshire Cistercians were less lucky; with the odd tower left standing (Ellerton, for example, has a remaining chimney-esque tower left standing by the parish church), or interesting piece of church carving retained (as in Swine’s misericords), many were disbanded for, as their inventories highlight, lead and the farming pastures around them.[[338]](#footnote-338) Examination of their inventories, letters regarding the fate of these houses and subsequent land grants of these religious houses, however, reveal a more complicated picture of power balance and negotiation between the king and his government with those more ‘on the ground.’ Coupled with the remaining communal groupings of nuns in these localities, seen through wills and gifts, and the relationship many involved retained or had with the women that once belonged there, a different picture emerges of communities in transition and through uprooting change.

This chapter aims to address the problems of the ‘top-down’ approach frequently taken by scholars in considering the implementation and connection to the Dissolution of the monasteries, hoping instead to provide a more nuanced interpretation of popular reception of the Suppression on a local level. While the first two chapters of this thesis aimed to demonstrate how texts and visual culture were informed by, and kept informing, both the communal monastic group itself and its fundamental relationship within wider devotional and practical communities, this chapter will demonstrate the continuation of this communal culture through similar sources at a time when the monastic group itself is threatened.

As with the previous chapter, comparison between Syon Abbey, Dartford Priory and the houses of the Yorkshire Cistercians with their German equivalents offers a deeper understanding of the differences between economically, socially, culturally and regionally diverse convents, but above all illuminates the similarities and connections between communities. It thus offers alternatives to what has historiographically gone before, but remains in keeping with the spiritual dimensions of monasticism. These three case-studies, seen before [Chapters One and Two of this work], during [Chapter Three] and after Suppression [Chapter Four] illuminate a key and often over-looked aspect of Reformation historiography – that of how English women religious and their communities reacted to and negotiated change, seen primarily through their remaining material and textual cultures.

*Communal Context and Negotiation outside the Convent*

For the majority of English nuns and their wider communities, it became necessary in the 1530s to engage in complex negotiations with external powers in order to protect their enclosed sisterhood and their place within the world. In order to examine some of these negotiations and the contradictions that arose in relation to monastic power and land, this study will return to the letters sent by members of the Yorkshire aristocracy in the so-called ‘scramble’ for monastic lands in the mid-to-late 1530s. Barely months after the enactment of the Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries Act, on the 1st April 1536, Sir George Darcy wrote “unto your honourable maistership… [and] to the Kynges maiestie to be good and gracious lorde unto [him] as concerning the preferrement of the nonery of Swyne Abbay.”[[339]](#footnote-339) “Besechying your honorabole maistership of yowr loving favour,” Sir George makes, as Sir John Neyvell did around the same time regarding Hampole Priory, an appeal to the familial connections he holds with the convent – “wherof my wif is foundres after the decesse of hir father.”[[340]](#footnote-340) His appeal, couched in terms of “if there be any pleasure of service I may doo yow [should] commaunde me as yowr owyn,” is relevant not only in terms of his more ancestral past, but also, pressingly, that of very recent events.

As the eldest son of Lord Thomas Darcy, a key figure and subsequent member of the group executed for roles in the Pilgrimage of Grace, it is probably that Sir George felt the necessity to build royal bridges for the economic and prestige-driven future of his family. If the obsequious tone of the letter does not surprise the modern reader, the fact that he is writing to the man responsible for his father’s fate whilst referencing his family connections to the convent might still appear odd. He does not say why he wants to own the convent or the land, and says nothing of its potential for farm land or pastoral and hunting richness. Given that his was a family with connections across the nation, the singling out of Swine Priory (the richest in Yorkshire, but still impoverished by national, or even male monastic standards) appears even more contradictory. Why, when attempting to ingratiate oneself back into the courtly fold after so public and dangerous a political fall-out – due in no small part to the attempted resistance of closing the monasteries – would Sir George hark back to his wife’s familial connection to a small, poverty-stricken convent?

Only a month earlier, Sir William Musgrove had made a remarkably similar application. In stating that “…it may please yow to be so much my good lord as to helpe me to the [Priory]… not only for suche puer service as I have downe unto his Grace but also for the same I am content to release unto youre lordship during yhr mynorite of John Tamworth and also shall accompte myself theby by youre lordeshipe”, Sir William made his claim through promising fealty and honour to those in charge. What makes Sir William’s claim especially interesting, however, is the fact that the monastery he singled out was Esholt, one of the smallest in terms of land or material significance in the country, and that a claim for this tiny convent is couched in these honourable terms.[[341]](#footnote-341) The only justifying detail Musgrove gives as to why he explicitly wants this “vere small priore of nonys callyd Esholt” is based upon the fact that the convent is built “within a lordship of my lait grandfather Sir Christopher Ward, who lyeth ther, callyd the manner of Esholt, which standeth vere commodyuslye for me, the holle valew.” Again, as Sir George did, Musgrove made an application for what might have appeared a politically and economically irrelevant convent, based on his family connections to a place rapidly falling out of governmental favour. The contention between flagging up potentially politically damaging personal connections with monastic houses at the same time as attempting to ingratiate themselves with the political elite is evident. What is more, this is troubling when attempting to fit it into the conventional narrative of Dissolution

When examining the family trees and connections of these potential owners, the relationships between the monasteries and these sixteenth-century men become even clearer and their applications even more challenging to the representation of the gentry and aristocrats as engaged in a scramble for convent land. Through his marriage to Dorothy Melton and through her maternal line, Sir George Darcy was related to one of the oldest and most established of Anglo-Norman Yorkshire families; the de Hiltons were not only barely a single generation removed from Sir George and his wife, but were, crucially, one of the main patrons of Swine Priory dating back to the mid-thirteenth century. Alexander de Hilton, lord of Swine in 1242, patronised the convent and it was entirely settled upon his grandson William by his father in 1288. There remained a clear genealogical lineage from him to Dorothy Darcy and her husband almost three centuries later.[[342]](#footnote-342)

These connections were manifested through physical material culture as well as the familial links. As the contributors to *A History of the County of York East Riding* described, the Hilton and Melton families are commemorated in the very parish church shared by both Swine parishioners and the female enclosed. Featuring tombs of knights and ladies in alabaster from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, ‘they almost certainly include the tomb of Sir Robert Hilton (who died around 1430, so presumably the grandfather of Dorothy Melton) and his wife.’[[343]](#footnote-343) The authors also pointed to the chapel formally holding brasses commemorating John and Elizabeth Melton, Dorothy Melton’s parents and, crucially, a dividing screen put up by the Darcys in 1531, merely years before Sir George’s father was involved in the Northern Uprising and Cromwell was in receipt of this application letter.[[344]](#footnote-344) Over the last century of Swine’s convent existence and, in particular, even the last few decades, the links to their founders were materially demonstrated, with connections to their patronage family, if not as strong as ever, certainly not forgotten.

Regarding the priory of Esholt’s connection to Sir William Musgrove, it appears again that the familial links between the author of this application letter and the convent go much further than the place of burial for Musgrove’s grandfather. Sir William’s mother Joan was not only the niece of Joan Ward, prioress of Esholt from 1480-1497, but was directly related to one of the most prominent families in medieval and early modern Yorkshire.[[345]](#footnote-345) Relating back to William Ward, the founder of Esholt, the family burial plot of the Wards had remained at Esholt until well into the sixteenth century. Henriette Peters, whose work has focused on the famous Mary Ward, asserted from her study of the Ward family wills that ‘the fifteenth-century Wards were not only very wealthy, but culturally far above the average of the then simple country people [around them].’[[346]](#footnote-346) Their material advowsons to and on behalf of Esholt by the Ward family around this time support this – for the poorest and tiniest convent in the county, the price of ‘a fur-trimmed overmantel with three-cornered kerchief and a girdle of white, gold-worked material adorned with gold’ that was to be sold and ‘the benefit thereof given to the Cistercian nunnery at Esholt’ cannot be financially underestimated.[[347]](#footnote-347) On more spiritual terms, the selling of coral rosary beads to pay for a picture of the Madonna to be given to Esholt furthers this idea that the Wards were patrons involved not only with the charitable donations of a nunnery in their ancestral proximity, but actively engaged with the devotional needs of the nuns in their financial care. For both Sir George Darcy and Sir William Musgrove, their relationships to the priories in which they took interest at the Suppression had deeper roots than merely hinted at in the letters to Cromwell.

The relationships between patrons and founders of monasteries at the Dissolution have been primarily addressed at length by Benjamin Thompson, in his seminal Alexander Prize essay. The emphasis on men and their monasteries continues into his analysis of the period up to Dissolution. He does not mention female monastics at all, without making it clear as to why nuns and the patrons of their monasteries are excluded. His case-study of Norwich and its monasteries is justified to answer primary questions within a tested framework and is still, however, hugely useful in addressing these negotiations of ownership and patronage (though Thompson pointed out it would take a book to answer this more fully). The author begun by establishing ‘the heart of the relationship between patrons and their monasteries’ as both ‘the exchange of temporal support for the spiritual benefits which would secure or ease the path of the lords in the after-life,’ and, for the religious, ‘the grants of property supported the holy lives… and therefore brought the donors some share in the spiritual benefits accruing from the monks activities.’[[348]](#footnote-348) With reference to the sudden thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century influx of Cistercian foundations in Yorkshire, it looks likely that the aristocratic French-lineaged families were touched by the particular devotional impetus of this relatively new and reforming order, and, as such, were driven to found houses for, as Thompson suggested, their own spiritual well-being and, crucially, that of preceding generations.

In asking the question as to why so little outcry was heard from monastic patrons and founding families at the Dissolution, Thompson asserted that, through the applications to own convents or the applications to keep monasteries functioning, patrons at local levels followed ‘to some extent… the lines which the medieval background suggests.’[[349]](#footnote-349) He used the example of the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Howard, who suggested a middle way between Suppression and monasticism, that of trying to turn Thetford priory into a secular college. Thompson goes on to affirm the close family connections Howard makes in his letter – “he did precisely what we should expect of a nobleman rooted in a tradition of family lordship… He urged the king to remember that his father and relatives and ancestors were buried in the priory… His draft set of articles for the college emphasised its continuity from its predecessor… This was to be a traditional re-foundation.”[[350]](#footnote-350) The idea that the aristocracy were negotiating with the elite, engaging within power plays for either changing the traditional focus of the monastic house, or using it to ‘give them an advantage in the scramble for pickings’, is a persuasive one. Certainly the common emphasis on genealogy running through the letters relating to Yorkshire convents is reflected here, as in letters from several other counties.

A more common explanation for the silence of patrons or the lack of opposition is, however, asserted in Thompson’s study of land advowsons throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, discovering that not only had there been ‘a striking upward mobility of advowsons,’ with ‘two thirds of [houses] in the patronage of the crown or higher nobility; the gentry and lesser nobility, therefore, whose earlier equivalents founded two-thirds of the houses, in 1535 held only one third.’[[351]](#footnote-351) For convents in Yorkshire, with their foundations so focused in the noble families of the county, this framework certainly seems applicable. The St Quentins (Nunappleton), the Le Flemings (Kirklees) and Hagets (Sinningthwaite) make no application towards their prospective houses, at least none that survive. (Aside from this, the difficulties even in establishing foundation patrons for Ellerton-on-Swale presents another issue even for the female inhabitants themselves.) The consequence of this upward mobility presents Thompson with another conclusion, one that appears the most common. In his Norwich study, ‘perhaps even more significant is the fact that no monastery was in the hands of the lineage which founded it… [and subsequently] If none of the houses had been founded by the family which held the patronage in 1535, there was no direct duty incumbent on patrons to support the prayers for the first founders. The locality of time between lords and spiritual beneficiaries had been lost.’[[352]](#footnote-352) If ‘each succeeding patron, who had the incentive to nurture an ancient institution on his doorstep because it reflected his family’s antiquity and local lordship as well as being responsible for the souls of his forebears, had the opportunity to earn these benefits by continuing such support,’ then it seemed to Thompson unlikely that the same spiritual emphasis would run through patrons whose familial souls were *not* benefitting from it.[[353]](#footnote-353)

Thompson concluded that most monasteries had lost their link of locality and proximity to their founding families, and that the poverty suffered by some religious houses had the circular effect of making them less attractive to new donors and, subsequently, only depleted their resources further. He summarised that ‘The Dissolution was to be one great updating to re-employ resources according to contemporary perceptions of need and utility, just as previous updatings had emphasised the forms and functions demanded by the generations that enacted them.’[[354]](#footnote-354) In his Norwich study, male monasteries failed to demonstrate their spiritual and practical use, and their founding families or the relations of their patrons were lost through both distance in time, and through space. As a result, the Suppression was able to happen as a transition; genealogical connections were employed infrequently to retain physical land, but rarely was this appropriated with any other motive.

The examples of the Yorkshire Cistercian convents differ primarily in two ways from these impressive findings and the framework they suggest. For the houses of Hampole, Keldholme, Rosedale, Swine and Esholt, the patron families were not removed, either in terms of proximity or through actual investment in the monastic community. Secondly, Thompson’s endorsement of the idea of the scramble for monastic land appears to disregard a more spiritual or even a pragmatic view from the laity reading of the Dissolution and its ongoing implementation. The evidence of Sir George and Sir William’s family in the fifteenth and even sixteenth-centuries implies a close connection or either practical and religious significance. In doing so, it crystallised the understanding of communities that were established through texts and material in the previous centuries going further into the sixteenth-century, based around similar and not-altogether complementary principles – the proximity to locality, the shared spirituality of lay and enclosed, and the special and imperative place that devotional visual culture held within spiritual practice. As, however, these enclosed communities came under threat, the role of the patron-family letter-writer, and what they were attempting to achieve, can be seen not just in terms of a ‘scramble’ for monastic land, but as a renegotiation of these larger, longer-held and multi-spanning communities of which female monasticism was so essential a religious and practical part.

Through the letters of Sir George, Sir William and even to a slightly lesser extent of Sir John Neville, and the contexts within which they were sent, it is plausible to suggest that this continuation of lineage through convents founded by their relations was an undeniably important aspect of retaining the community. On the one hand, all three men wrote letters pointing out these close familial connections as if to draw attention to their ancient involvement with the proximate community, asserting their current status through established lineage. In terms of Neville and Darcy, this can be seen as even more overt – having married into such families, the idea that they want to align themselves with a long line of socially, economically or culturally important families is unsurprising. For Darcy too, the added disgrace of his father (with the potential effects running from politically uncomfortable to completely socially disastrous), gave additional impetus to his desire to forge a role as a member of both a new as well as a traditional family circle.

On the other hand in these cases, and through Sir Brian Hastings’ appeal for the keeping open of Hampole Priory, the spiritual character of the houses to which they were committed is hard to ignore. The material evidence of the connections between Swine and Esholt with Musgrove and Darcy in the sixteenth century are firmly linked to the spirituality, and particularly the female-centric, convent-based spirituality, of their convents. The buying of the Madonna for Esholt is an immediate representation of the piety outlined in both visual and textual culture.[[355]](#footnote-355) The dividing screen for the church at Swine, presumably meant to keep the nuns away from the lay parishioners, furthers an idea of enclosure boundaries being established and settled by patronage.[[356]](#footnote-356) The fact that these convents had such strong generational links with these men adds credence to the idea that, when locality and proximity to the family foundation had *not* been lost, the belief that the enclosed women could be of spiritual use in aiding the related dead’s well-being appears to be strong.

Their letters implying these connections offer a glimpse into the changing structures of power during the Suppression, with the (perhaps not conscious, but nevertheless evident) intentions of negotiating a familiar spiritual communal structure rather than simply accepting the religious and practical changes of the Dissolution and making their greedy best of it. For Sir William, the connections to the Wards of Esholt meant not only a family-patronage link, but a far more concrete and immediate one; as Peters suggested, Joan Ward, his sister, was presumably the same Joan Ward who was Prioress at Esholt from 1480-1497.[[357]](#footnote-357) The investing in the nunneries whose churches held physical and visual representations of their family, with regards to the Darcys, the de Hiltons and the de Meltons, and whose family had a long history of female religious in positions of responsibility, further point to their understandings of these convents as places of memory preservation. Communal links between priory and the outside world here are cemented through family ties, both antique and contemporary, retaining both the spiritual and practical connections to proximate Yorkshire Cistercian houses.

The Hampole letter that hoped to prevent suppression, furthermore, supports a limited but valid number of similar sympathetic letters from across the county (Sir Peter Edgecumbe, for example, wrote to Cromwell in 1537 with the view that because “I am by the kyngges ffather by hys graunt to my poare ffather made to hym and hys isue male, ffounder off the priory off Tottenes and the nunry off Cornworthye in Devonsschyre,” he was able to claim as ‘as to Tottenes, the pryour ther ys a man off goode vertuus converssacyon, and a good viander, and I can do no lesse with my thruthe and dewty but to advertse yow off that I know trew in this causse…”).[[358]](#footnote-358) This offers further weight to the idea of generational focus within land claims on monastic houses.

The focus on Hampole in particular is interesting in terms of a devotional community; arguably the most famous of all Yorkshire convents, (and perhaps even, eventually, on a more national and international level), Hampole’s housing of and close personal connection with Richard Rolle adds an interesting element when considering that it was the only Yorkshire convent to be singled out in such a way. The claims in this letter were not based in family connections, nor were they an attempt to take a negotiated and powerful hold of the land to which it referred, but, instead, they were based entirely on its ‘good name, fame and rule, and so reputed and taken amonges all the Cuntry aboute me.’ [[359]](#footnote-359) It seems a strange coincidence that this should be the case without any reference to the broader devotional community, as defined and explored in Chapter One of this work, and it is certainly possible to suggest a correlation between this place of introverted, impressive and famous piety, the devotional community that it was a part of and the spirituality of an aristocrat manning so clear a defence of it.

Musgrove’s letter regarding Esholt concluded with something of an ambiguous statement. Explicitly mentioning the female inhabitants of the nunnery, Sir William suggested not only that he could act as something of a custodian of the contents of the monastery, but that, without him, such contents would not be around for much longer – “That I may have the Kinges Hignes letter in breff tyme Unto the Pryores and convent for the premysses commanding them to ssaye all ther gudes and the commoditise ffrom any further sail or other grauntes.”[[360]](#footnote-360) In terms of communities based so strongly on both, through the subtle employment of text alongside the existing material gifts and advowsons to the convents, this understanding of goods that could be sold, and of which the state preferred to keep control of through an external agent like Musgrove, is intriguing. As the next two sections will go on to discuss further in comparison to Ocker’s ground-breaking work on material culture and its involvement with the Reformation in Germany, these spiritually imperative and economically diverse goods within a convent or monastery are first understood and asserted in this period, with inventories drawn up and the Court of Augmentations founded. The keeping of convent materiality within state control appears to be one of the ways in which the government themselves were involved in this negotiation – for the first time, the material and visual culture was witnessed, taken stock of and explored by external agents, addressing in new ways the structures of monastic enclosed communities and their patronised links to the outer world.

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The letters regarding the monasteries of Hampole, Esholt and Swine are some of the most oblique yet ultimately revealing documents of the Yorkshire Cistercian women when seen in the wider practical and spiritual contexts. The communities of which they were an essential part demonstrated their support through this negotiation of power from state to locality, power based within both antique foundation and patron connections that the years had not completely, or at all, diminished, and power based through the convent, still imparting spiritual meaning for past and current generations. In terms of national context, the support received might not be typical, but it is certainly not absent altogether; Thompson’s conclusions that for male monasteries, there simply was not the support there at the time of Dissolution from original founders or long-time patrons does not hold true for these Cistercian women, raising questions about the regionality of support networks and connections to particular orders and foundations. Of course, it needs to be kept in mind that the Yorkshire Cistercian convents did not all have such favourable connections, and even the ones that did were not overwhelmed with support to keep them open or negotiate a change. All the same, however, the wider implications of these attempts to re-found spiritual power and the materiality of the convent in communal, long-held contexts are a strong indicator in the devotional and practical communities that the houses were involved in during the decade.

*Contradiction and Resistance through Text and Material in the Convent*

Syon Abbey and Dartford Priory did not receive the same proposals of power negotiation in the 1530s, but their experiences of Suppression were still steeped in their close and wider communities. As royal foundations, both relatively young (and one of the youngest of all English convents) these houses had a different experience from their sisters in the North; their support did not come from their founding families and, in fact, their royal connections demonstrated another aspect of contradiction to their reactions and negotiations of the changes they were undergoing. Through their texts and material cultures, within internal and wider devotional communities, Dartford and Syon faced the Suppression from an alternate position to their locally-patronised Yorkshire sisters; their reactions continued this negotiation of state-power, but did so through measures of resistance and opposing ambiguities.

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With the publication of some of its early sixteenth-century works (the *Orcherd of Syon* being a notable example) chiming strongly against the growth of Protestantism across Europe, Syon Abbey’s textual reactions to reforming theology and to royal enactment is one of the most historiographically dense and enlightening fields of study in all works on English women religious. Grisé stated that Syon’s writing, printing and reading such a text was both ‘politically charged’ and ‘historically specific’, but in terms of practical resistance, only represented what Walsham and Jones have called ‘a further straw in the wind’ with regards to the broad changes taking place with Catholicism and monasticism.[[361]](#footnote-361) Regardless, such works foreshadowed Syon’s participation in resisting Henrician governmental reforms in the most active, and communal, of ways.

In embracing the political ideals of its Continental mystic heroines through study, as well as producing works and engaging in behaviour that both subtly and unsubtly undermined authoritative political reform, Syon engaged with one of the most controversial, and as argued by some, most dangerous opponents to the monarch’s government. It was through the community of Syon’s textual and practical involvement with Elizabeth Barton, ‘the most extraordinary and awkward critic of Henry VIII’s search for a divorce,’ that their resistant feeling became embodied and emboldened.[[362]](#footnote-362) This event, of course, foreshadows the actual events of the Dissolution by half a decade, but it remains an excellent case through which reform of and challenge to ‘traditional religion’ are confronted by Syon’s internal and wider communities who are expressed and who express themselves through texts.

Though Barton’s letters to him do not survive, the Holy Maid of Kent was known, at the height of her resistance-fuelled prophecies, to have written to Pope Clement VII.[[363]](#footnote-363) In asking him to ‘stand against the English king [and his divorce]’, Watt asserted that Barton was channelling the mysticism of politically-driven prophets Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden, who famously involved themselves with the greatest political events of their time, being both accepted and understood by the leading political figures with whom they corresponded.[[364]](#footnote-364) The connection between these instances of female prophetism appear remarkably clear, yet it was within the devotional community of Syon Abbey that Barton was fully introduced to the inspirations ‘on which she [subsequently] modelled herself.’[[365]](#footnote-365)

The devotional community at Syon was, as has previously been argued, greatly engaged with the spirituality of the Continental female mystics of the previous centuries, shaping the devotional character of both the Abbey community itself and informing the overall spiritual output into a broader religious community. By the 1520s, given its reputation as a vibrant home for late medieval mysticism, it made a natural home for the esteemed Barton as the renown for her belief and her visions began to grow.[[366]](#footnote-366) It was there that she ‘internalise[d] the models of piety which she [had] encountered’ in the vast devotional works of their library, leading her to eventually take ‘her place in a long succession of holy women.’ [[367]](#footnote-367)

Yet to suggest that Barton’s entire set of anti-government prophecies, and the way she captured public and political attention with them, was purely the singular result of her being read to from the *Orcherd of Syon* and Bridget’s *Revelations* is simplistic. Her status as an opponent was heightened to dangerous levels because of her involvement with, and the backing of, Syon’s intellectual superiors, as well as the support she received from a much broader spiritual community. During her time in the Abbey, she found spiritual counsel with some of the most esteemed of its members, including their confessor John Fewterer and Abbess Agnes Jordan, who herself would be martyred for the Catholic monastic cause.[[368]](#footnote-368) It was through their devotional community that such influential members created a resistance, lending authority to Barton’s claims that consequently added to the severity of her treason. Having gained the support of ‘a sizeable number of influential people who were regarded by the government as being enemies of the King’s marriage and his religious policies,’ it was through this community of resistance that Barton was called to answer the verbal offences brought against her.[[369]](#footnote-369)

In her later confession, Barton asserted, in ‘admitting’ to her ‘fraud’, that some responsibility lay with the powerful company that had guided her: ‘…it was well known unto these men that I was a poor wench without learning… [that] the things which I feigned were profitable unto them… they praised me, and bore me in hand that it was the Holy Ghost and not I that did them.’[[370]](#footnote-370) While both the authenticity of her prophecies and the line between encouragement and manipulation has long been historiographically contentious, the fact remains that it was from within a communal spiritual context that Barton’s prophetic politics were brought to light. She was dangerous from within this small monastic group because of the spiritual and influential guidance available to her, but also within the broadest devotional community of popular Catholic piety, as she met public expectations that were ‘deeply rooted in contemporary religious culture.’[[371]](#footnote-371) Syon Abbey was an integral and central part of her community of self-belief and remained demonstrative of a wide spiritual community that embraced her before causing her downfall. Barton was not a singular, conscious protagonist in a ‘story of resistance to the Reformation’, but rather both a product of, and a living, active embodiment of, a devotional community bubbling with resistant feeling; an embodiment of the texts and their themes that made up and so deeply affected the devotional community of late medieval England.[[372]](#footnote-372)

As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that Barton left little in the way of material culture or even physical sources. The record of the goods that she left and that went into the hands of St Sepulchre’s, in Canterbury, is, for a nun of poor background, as sparse as might be expected:

‘ “A coschyn blade,”, an old cushion, two carpets, a mattress and other bedding. Platters, dishes, &c., 12lbs., which the prioress has paid 12d. A towel and three pillowberes. Two “candstyckes.” A coat, for which dame Catharine Wyttsun has paid 5s. A piece of plank for a table. A little chest.’

The second half of the inventory draws even more of a connection between Barton and the Benedictine women with whom she was professed:

‘Stuff remainging in the nunnery pertaining to dame Eliz. Barton, at the request of the lady prioress… Two new cushions given to the church; a mantle and kirtle to the youngest nun; an Irish mantle, a cupboard with two great chests, and two stools and a “canstycke” to the prioress; a coverlet and an old kirtle to dame Alys Colman, at the request of the lady prioress.[[373]](#footnote-373)’

Given that the vast majority of Barton literature was destroyed in an amnesty in the immediate aftermath of her death (confirming, for Diane Watt, that the fear Barton caused and the feelings that she encapsulated as dangerous and subversive for the establishment at a time of upheaval), the record of her worldly goods remains an interesting insight into a woman for whom ‘very little of the surviving information concerning her life is reliable.’[[374]](#footnote-374) The role of the lady prioress in the attainment and distribution of her goods suggests a more fixed, concrete role within the priory community than otherwise her fame might have suggested, and the specific gifting to the youngest nun and dame Colman suggest either further friendships or necessary, warranted need. Furthermore, the inventory rings remarkably true with the material culture given and left to the impoverished Yorkshire nuns, as discussed in the previous chapter – the blatant domesticity of the candlesticks, clothes, bedding and furniture continue this sense of devotional internal community even though it is demonstrated through such everyday material culture.

The spiritual and practical communities of nuns, and particularly the close, internal communities of women forming friendships and living in close proximity, within late medieval and early modern Germany have a similarly human (female) and textual embodiment**.** The journal of Charitas Pirkheimer is a self-conscious narrative of a convent through the German Reformation, set in the middle and turbulent religious years of the mid 1520s, following ‘some of the things that happened to our cloister here at St Clare’s in Nuremberg in those dangerous, rebellious times.’[[375]](#footnote-375) Quickly escalating from a struggle between the convent and their male leaders in both religious (monks and friars) and secular (the council) terms, it goes on to present something of a theological battle between the outside world and a united (for the most part) sisterhood. For the Abbess and many of her spiritual daughters, Charitas Pirckheimer’s work encapsulated in microcosmic detail the Reformation’s battle with monastic life. Furthermore, however, it created a community through the text; when seen in comparison to Syon Abbey (a cloister of similar fame and fortune), this rings remarkably true of enclosed worlds seeing themselves through insular, created texts at the moment of the greatest outward struggle.

Adopting the condescending tone of their ‘wild’ and ‘renegade’ male critics, Charitas skilfully weaved the rhetoric of reformers not with her own assertions of the importance of monastic life, of the practical and spiritual aid and advancement provided by enclosed women or even out-and-out hostility, but with a strongly formed sense of community within her convent. Through the textual construction of unification, the voices of dissent and tribulation appear at once to be almost comical in their hysteria, but also, more importantly, out of step with their own religious understandings and those of the wider community. After detailing the much-quoted reasoning of reformers against monasticism (“[they preached to [us] and spoke of the new teachings and argued incessantly that the cloistered were damned and subject to temptations and that it was not possible for them to attain salvation there… We were all damned,”) and the attempts of city officials to manoeuvre their spiritual focus and sacramental systems, Abbess Pirckheimer contrasted this with the reactions of the women in her care:

“When we learned that the honourable City Council had decided to force us to stop using the Franciscans, I reported this to the convent and sought the sisters’ advice… Not one sister wanted to be subject to [wild priests and renegade monks]… Instead we should submit an appeal [to make it clear] what burden and injury would result from such a change in the hope that such potential harm to us would touch their hearts… And so I followed their advice and read it aloud to the convent. All the sisters, with no exceptions, agreed with it.”[[376]](#footnote-376)

The communal ideal created by the phrasing of ‘we’, ‘us’ and of joint decision making is particularly employed by their Abbess in the face of disjointed and what would become aggressive reforming words and actions to create, through text, a unification that in practice may have felt less certain.

Similarities to Syon’s use of lyricism and visual imagery in their sixteenth-century works is particularly striking in some passages. Quoting a letter that she had written to a spiritual adviser outside of the convent, Abbess Pirckheimer urged him to “Help protect my dear lambs from the wolves that could divide or harm the vineyard of Christ.”[[377]](#footnote-377) The very act of including this external letter was a means of impressing upon the reader the formation of this textual community within a devotional one, including writing within writing to demonstrate communal and crucially external connections. The understanding of a devotional community, enlivened and defined by both compassionate and biblical imagery, as well as symbolic understandings of the self and of mutual religiosity (as argued in Chapter Two of this work), is shown through references like these to be specific and undeniably relevant unifying aspects. On being offered lay priests to come and hear their confession, Charitas wrote with this similarly violent imagery and emphatic feelings as witnessed in the Man of Sorrows and Pietá iconography:

“Moreover, it would be most troubling to my cloister and me if we were given lay priests. The way things are going with them now it would be better and more useful if you sent an executioner into our cloister who would cut off all our heads rather than sending us fat, drunken, immoral priests.”[[378]](#footnote-378)

Interestingly, the reference to ‘fat, drunken, immoral priests’ resounded with Katherine Lemel’s contemporary description of the Christ figure image that she was so dissatisfied with, supporting the view that, though enclosed, just as their English sisters, German nuns were not as dead to the world as theory might espouse.[[379]](#footnote-379) It suggests that they were far more knowingly aware of the dangers and outrages of their own religious systems than reformers, the public and even future historians might have assumed. Later, Charitas repeated this somewhat extreme view: “Meanwhile, some good friends advised us to choose a pious, honourable priest to whom we could then confess when necessary… For there was very much talk about us, that we would rather die than confess to anyone but the Franciscans... Then the sisters decided that we should choose Conrad Schotter, who was a pious, courageous priest about 65 years old.”[[380]](#footnote-380) Their request for this particular confessor was unsuccessful, and led to far greater upset (“The more the superintendent praised the monk, the more I swore on behalf of myself and the whole convent that we truly did not want to ever confess to him. Nor did we want to have him as a visitor or as a superior”).[[381]](#footnote-381)

This demonstration of active communal agency, echoed again and again throughout the journal, is contrasted against what Charitas asserted was the reformers’ view of the convent. Sarcastically quoting that “In all cloisters a wild life ensued,” Abbess Pirckheimer used her writing to cleverly contrast and compare the seeming chaos and disruption around them brought about by reforming thought with the structured, almost democratic community inside; in her description of Anna Schwarz, who “began to live as a Lutheran,” Charitas employed dramatic opposition through the form of the story:

“She set herself up in opposition to her sisters… When the convent sat at the table, she slept. When they were in the choir, she ate. She was uninhibited and did whatever she wanted to… She said she did not want to be a sheep, but a shepherdess. By that she meant she could perform the office of abbess too since she was so learned and clever.”[[382]](#footnote-382)

While the stark contrast to her devout sisters, each of whom “without exception [had] all voted unanimously… that they would keep the Rule which they had vowed to God and in no way obey the rule which the council had given them,” needs little explanation, it is interesting to take note of Charitas’ writing of them as a group, presenting their togetherness as an active force, as agency against those that both diminished their function and belittled their sense of self. Decisions regarding the future of their convent were presented as having been made communally: “We agreed among ourselves that in no way would we give up the cloister.” In reply to the council’s assertion that she, Charitas alone, “should release all the sisters from the vows they had taken and so they could make use of the Christian freedom and would no longer be obligated or forced to do something… [because they would instead be able to exercise] their own free will so that they could cease and desist whenever they wanted,” it was as a single body, and not without a touch of knowing irony, that all these women (presumably except for Lutheran Anna Schwarz) responded: “humbly and willingly, they stated that they did not want to be free.”[[383]](#footnote-383)

The nuns of Syon Abbey never so explicitly wrote of their resistance to reform. In many ways, Charitas Pirckheimer and her convent’s experience, and those of other German cloisters, of reform were very different to the English Abbey; convents were not bombarded with reforming messages, nor were nuns of other orders and houses desperate to leave, as propagandists made so much of in early sixteenth-century Germany. As it happens, very few English nuns appear to have wished to retire or even to marry after the lifting of their chastity oaths by King Edward; from all Yorkshire houses in this study, after the reports of government officials, only one elderly Cistercian nun wished to retire before the Suppression made this a reality for them all. What is strikingly similar, however, is the creation and use of texts to form and identify community; Charitas Pirckheimer’s work, just like the *Orcherd of Syon* and other spiritual works found within Syon’s extensive and exhaustive library, placed the sisterhood of her internal community into a broader communal framework of wider devotion and formed a resistant community through words and phrases to combat the linear arguments of external reformers. It was through texts that both abbesses defined, and found place for, their resistant communities against secular opponents, whether theologically or politically (or both, as the case may have been) opposed.

Charitas wrote with barely concealed scorn that her contemporaries in other houses across Nuremberg were not as committed to this same level of resistance. Quoting the council member who berated them that “He was utterly ashamed that he alone among all the cloister superintendants had such trouble with us”, Abbess Pirckheimer almost poked fun at the idea that this cloister was being difficult and unique, when in reality it remained the other convents who had failed to fulfil the duties of their vocation: “All the other cloisters had told their superintendants that they would do what the councillors wanted. We alone were so stubborn and so very clever that we would follow nothing but our own notions. Truly we would lead ourselves astray this way.”[[384]](#footnote-384) Syon Abbey and Dartford Priory did not follow this extreme example of actively resisting secular intentions, but they did not, in small and potentially even unconscious ways, allow such changes to go ahead without their consent.

Syon Abbey failed to sign the Acknowledgement of Royal Supremacy meaning that, in however passive a way, their abbey was never officially dissolved in the same way as every other female religious house. Dartford Priory, however, expressed community togetherness through the contradictions that lay at the heart of their difficult negotiations with the secular authorities keen to quieten and close them. It was through contradictions that such community spirit was expressed. Around the mid-1530s, amid the context of Minor Dissolutions, governmental visitations and Continental religious upheaval, Dartford’s long-standing prioress Elizabeth Cressener wrote to Cromwell with the communal good of her convent in mind. Asking “especially that we may not receive into our monastery none of any other religion”, Cressener asserted not only the strongly order-ed identity of these Dominican women, but also implied the formidable strength of communal feeling between their single English house: “…for we be of that profession and habit that none other be of within this realm; and therefore it should be very troublous to us to have any other than we bring up after our own order and fashion as knoweth our merciful Lord.”[[385]](#footnote-385) Paul Lee pointed out that, since Cressener had been prioress since just before the turn of the sixteenth century, and that most nuns were still claiming pensions as late as 1556, the Dartford community was made up of women who had professed under the same abbess and, therefore, ‘had much in common with each other which made them different from other nuns.’[[386]](#footnote-386) Theirs was a convent who understood, took pride in and took measures to protect its uniqueness as a community of Dominican women in England.

Only a couple of years before this letter was presumably written, Elizabeth Cressener signed, on behalf of this entire community, the Acknowledgement of Royal Supremacy, famously renouncing papal authority, asserting fealty to Queen Anne and acknowledging the King as head of the Church, as well as noting Archbishop Cramner’s declaration of their marriage as entirely legitimate.[[387]](#footnote-387) Jonathan Michael Gray pointed out that the act of accepting this Oath, with the rolling out of a new, abridged profession with only ‘negligible variations’ barely a month later (most pointedly abbreviating the clause about renouncing the Pope’s laws and not including Cramner’s role in the royal marriage), ‘is exceptional in its form and in its early date.’[[388]](#footnote-388) For a convent of such strong and identifiable communal connections, their seeming willingness to submit to this acknowledgement appears at odds. Yet both moves can be seen as complementary sides of the reactions and involvements with the Suppression of the monasteries; both were attempts to sustain and maintain their ways of life in whichever way was considered appropriate. The religious negotiations during reform and Dissolution at Dartford, somewhat paradoxically, placed this Dominican house in a wider community of religious women aiming at keeping their communities together against external difficulties.

The correspondence of Elizabeth Cressener Senior with Thomas Cromwell appears, superficially, to present the Prioress as similar to the nuns in whom Charitas Pirckheimer was so disappointed. However, when her career at Dartford is examined, Cressener Senior shows more than a passing resemblance to the strong-willed and intelligent Nuremberg abbess. Leader from 1488 to her death just before the Suppression, Cressener was at the centre of the negotiations between convent and government in the run up to the end of her life. Paul Lee suggested that, particularly under her leadership, Dartford maintained a harmonious and complementary relationship with their surrounding locality, as can be seen through their material and textual remains discussed in the previous chapters.[[389]](#footnote-389) Her relationship with Thomas Cromwell, however, is one of interesting and studied intercession, carefully played using rhetoric and argument as skilled as Charitas’ in often challenging circumstances.

In the same letter in which she makes the successful claim to avoid taking on any other nuns from different orders, Elizabeth Cressener reflected on a direct appeal that she had made a couple of years earlier to Cromwell, demonstrating a supreme personal and communal agency when regarding the spiritual well-being of the convent. Remembering that Cromwell wanted to place a certain Mr Palmer, one of his friends/connections, in the role of high steward at Dartford, Cressener reflected that “at that time I was so bold to write to your mastership my mind, and all my sisters, in that cause; certifying your good mastership that we never had none that occupied that room but such as hath been of the king’s grace’s most noble council.”[[390]](#footnote-390)

After listing the men who had held the office (demonstrating her pronounced understanding and status as head of Dartford over such a long period, as well as articulating the shared memories that bound the community), she requested that Cromwell himself accept the office: ‘we [the nuns] would beseech you to accept such a poor gift, given to your good mastership by your poor beadwomen, with the fee thereunto belonging.”[[391]](#footnote-391) Her additional request regarding the identity of new recruits into the Priory is couched in similar terms - “Beseeching you of your charitable assistance in all our rightful causes…”[[392]](#footnote-392)

A similar appeal to intervene in the case of the apparently difficult Mr Stroddle, whom the Lord of Rochester had placed at Dartford after ‘he perceived that he could not quietly live with Mr Stroddle,’ was put before Cromwell by Elizabeth Cressener merely months later.[[393]](#footnote-393) The prioress’s words here belie an internal power struggle (“And as soon as he came he took it upon him to be president, contrary to my mind, but only that he said he had the king’s grace’s authority; the which I now perceive he never had, till this time, of your good lordship, and he took no manner of pains belonging to the said office”) that both threatens her authority and the stability of her community.[[394]](#footnote-394) To combat this, she again asserted her influence, and her belief in this power, by beginning with “your suppliant, Elizabeth Cressener, prioress of the monastery of Dartford, the which hath been this forty-nine years unworthy governess of this great house” and the togetherness of her convent (“my only hope and trust is in God, and in your good lordship, for the repealing or reformation of the premises; and I, with my poor sisters, shall always continue your poor beadwomen, as we be especially bound”).[[395]](#footnote-395)

It was this relationship between Cressener and Cromwell, of the prioress applying for favours from the prominent master for her convent’s own advantage and ‘resulting perhaps in special protection for Dartford’, that Mary C. Erler outlined as ‘particularly acute on the prioress’ part.’[[396]](#footnote-396) She went on to place Cressener’s letter in a Late Medieval/Early Modern Kent context, suggesting that they ‘provide a sense of the forces to which religious houses were subject, both from lay and ecclesiastical allies.’[[397]](#footnote-397) For a convent so actively involved in the devotional community of the age, a spirituality that so coloured and enhanced their engaged work in their localities, it might appear odd that not only did Prioress Cressener seemingly need and want Cromwell’s support in her consistent appeals to him, but that the support was seemingly mutual, with her signing the Acknowledgement of Royal Supremacy so early on. But in terms of the practicalities of the good of her community, Elizabeth Cressener’s attempts at fealty with Cromwell were far more based within a contradictory negotiation of power in order to keep her community together and the spiritual and practical good it was doing alive.

Such negotiation, compromise and challenge were not without precedent for her Dominican sisters on the Continent when faced with internal and fundamental change. While Dartford was not visited and ‘corrected’ like so many Dominican houses had been under Raymond of Capua’s Observant reform through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, their reading material and activities betray the same ‘depth of spirituality and religious commitment’ that demonstrated a profound connection with their reformed brothers and sisters.[[398]](#footnote-398) Yet in terms of resistance and negotiation to reform, Dominican nuns across Europe had precedence not only for being both some of the first to accept and fulfil the requirements of Observant reform, but also for standing firm and being less willing to take the Observance changes. Regina D. Schiewer discussed the prolonged and famous resistance of the Nuremberg convent of St Katharina, only broken by council intervention and reformed nuns moving in and taking over positions of responsibility.[[399]](#footnote-399) The Dominican nuns of Strasbourg similarly reacted against outside forces entering and changing their practices.[[400]](#footnote-400) Amy Leonard asserted the foreshadowing of the ‘resistance, rebellion and compromise to come during the sixteenth century’ with the nuns greeting fifteenth-century reform ‘with the same concern for their position, religious well-being and traditional life.’[[401]](#footnote-401) In this context, Cressener’s diplomacy appears a factor of the same negotiation of reform as her corresponding prioresses and abbesses from the previous century, placing her in a wide and extensive devotional community of women understanding and respecting their rights over their own convents.

In attempting to form an alliance with one of the most important men in the country, Cressener was trying to maintain her community and fulfil the societal functions that had become particularly important under her leadership. In a way, her actions could be categorised as a form of resistance; though not in common with Syon’s textual opposition or Charitas Pirckheimer’s stubborn and vocal refusal, Cressener tried more oblique and contradictory forms of opposition, that of the appearance of subservience and the appearance of encouragement. As an interesting aside, the Oath of 1534 was left unsigned by each Dartford nun – it is, of course, difficult to say whether this was a pointed decision or not, but it certainly appears in the context of contradictory forms of power and powerful resistance that this silence could have been a measure of passive opposition from the Dartford women, who were not unable to make their point through text.

On her death eighteen months before the Dissolution, Cromwell and Lord Rochester were closely involved in the election of a new prioress for Dartford. Erler, in her use of the last Dartford Prioress Joan Fane (or Vane) as a case-study of Cromwell’s nuns, remarked that, before Cressener died, she attempted to ‘ensure a smooth succession [for Dartford, in such difficult times]… by summoning both the Dominican provincial John Hodgkin and Rochester to her bedside.’[[402]](#footnote-402) This smooth succession, she suggested, was intended to be the last exercise of Cressener’s own authority over the convent over which she had presided for so long that excluded Cromwell; again, supporting the idea that for all her obedient-sounding correspondence with the state, Prioress Cressener intended, and was cleverly exercising, the motivations of her convent around Cromwell, rather than sitting in compliance.[[403]](#footnote-403)

Joan Fane, the nun picked for the job, was exalted by the men around her: “Supposes it is that she [Cressener] may resign her room to one of her sisters, or is she be dead that they may elect another… None of the sisters is meeter than Joan Vane. Though there are many in the house older, there is none better learned, nor more discreet. She is above thirty.”[[404]](#footnote-404) It remains unclear whether Fane was Cressener’s choice, orchestrated from her death bed, or whether her social position and family connections to Cromwell made her a more appropriate political choice; John Dunkin asserted that Fane was the daughter of Humphrey Fane of Hildon, and a sister of Sir Ralph, knighted seven years later at the Siege of Boulogne and a recipient of much former priory land after the Dissolution.[[405]](#footnote-405)

Though the general historiographical impression of Fane is, in comparison to Cressener, a reasonably unfavourable one, pointing to her compliance with Cromwell and her quiet obedience of handing over cash and land exactly when asked, it might be possible to imagine her as something of an operator in a similar vein. Through her only surviving letter, the references she made explicitly to her internal community and implicitly to the external devotional one are clear and important, even if her application was probably unsuccessful. Addressing the attempted profession of Bridget Browning, “one of my religious company”, Fane attempted to persuade Cromwell to allow this novice to enter Dartford in the fullest of spiritual senses.

“[She] was brought to my monastery long time past, only by the great labour, means and request made by her mother to the late prioress [Cressener] of the said monastery now deceased, to the intent she should be a religious woman and recluse… [She has been] neither by her [Cressener] nor me detained or kept against her friends’ minds, contrary to any statute, decree or ordinance… but that the said late prioress, I, and my sisters, have always been ready to permit and suffer the said Bridget to depart to her said mother at her free will and liberty; which to do she has always, being very sore prefixed in her outward mind, and also as it should seem in her heart to my said religion, hath refused and denied. Wherefore it may please your good lordship that she may come to your lordship’s presence, and that the effects of her heart and mind may be by your good lordship tenderly accepted and heard…”[[406]](#footnote-406)

The application is couched in communal terms and references at a wider spiritual community. Referring several times to her predecessor, Fane acknowledged Cressener’s status and the living memory of her, and of Cromwell’s seemingly devoted servant, using it to legitimise Bridget Browning’s place in the community. Her support of Bridget’s vocation and the focus on Bridget’s free will to leave placed the novice and her would-be sisters in and against the theological and often salacious argument resounding around Europe about the desire of women to enter convents, or rather, the lack of desire and the enforcement of cruel enclosure around them (Charitas Pirckheimer similarly makes reference to three girls taken out of the convent by their mothers, horrified at the tales of debauchery happening inside cloisters, yet utterly against their will: “By the fourth day afterwards Clara Nutzel had still not eaten one bite in the world outside the cloister and the others had cried unceasingly,”). Finally, the internal and contradictory negotiations with Cromwell echoed the debate and dialogue between monastic houses and state of the era, found across orders and regional boundaries; even though Cromwell had forbidden the profession of new nuns in the final stages of cloister lives, Fane attempted through these appeals to allow Bridget to become a fully-fledged part of their community. Based, however, on the pensions records post-Suppression, Bridget’s name does not appear, suggesting that she left Dartford unprofessed, un-pensioned and very much an unofficial member of their community. The extensive list of lands and properties Joan Fane rented out in the swift eighteen months in which she was prioress, again, point to her commitment to her local community very much through materiality and communal understandings of the priory.[[407]](#footnote-407) For Dartford, a priory with royal foundations and excellent resources, but without the youth, wealth and outward-reaching spiritual focus of Syon Abbey, the women themselves could and had to participate in these power negotiations, unlike their Yorkshire sisters, whose male patrons involved themselves, or through the printing and textual cultures of the Bridgettines. In a contradictory form of resistance through negotiation, the prioresses of Dartford in the sixteenth century attempted the continuation of their communities through words and through actions.

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Erler pointed to the fact that on Dissolution, Fane presumably went back to her wealthy family, rather than continue in a quasi-monastic community like that of her professed sister Elizabeth Cressener Junior (the late prioress’s niece) and others, suggesting something of a division within the house.[[408]](#footnote-408) The women of Syon similarly stayed together in small groups of sufficient numbers to be called nearly fifteen years later to reform under Queen Mary, despite some of their leading male advisers being martyred. The negotiations of power in Yorkshire for monastic land remained, for the most part, fruitless; though, again, testamentary evidence reveals connections continued between these women over the course of the next, unenclosed decade. The next chapter will discusses the post-Suppression life of these women in detail, but looking at these immediate conclusions, it seems an appropriate place to examine the contexts of all three case-studies. Each was involved, actively or otherwise, in textual considerations and definitions of their community, and each convent was similarly involved in the continuation of their communities and connections through negotiation, either a more straight-forward process, a dramatic resistant communal stand-off or a more engaged, contradictory balance of power. The next section will address exactly what happens when these negotiations of power fail or succeed in challenging ways, addressing more completely the material cultures left behind by the Suppression as well as the community-binding texts.

*Dissolution, Land and Secular Transference*

For Christopher Ocker, in his pivotal study *Church Robbers and Reformers in Germany, 1525-1547*, the confiscation of monastic property:

‘started with an inventory of monastic holdings ordered by a prince of city magistrates. Such inventories were not new. They had been made in the fifteenth century in conjunction with reforms of monasteries… In the sixteenth century (this was new), the inventories could be accompanied or followed by the appointment of evangelical preachers who would declare the vows of monks and nuns to be wrong, unbinding, impermanent and revocable. Princes might lay claim to monastic incomes and/or precious objects through confiscation decrees and/or appointed collectors. The inventories and decrees were legally defended as protective acts, the ruler posing as custodian of the church’s deposit or as a sequester keeping a disputed property in trust...’[[409]](#footnote-409)

He continued by outlining the process of secular German authorities disbanding the monasteries in their jurisdiction:

‘…the progress from inventory to confiscation and closure was often very slow, sometimes never completed, and sometimes reversed. Many of the monasteries were not dissolved but simply faded away by attrition at different rates. In these cases the immediate anti-monastic agent was a relatively powerless individual, namely the preacher who inspired a voluntary abandonment of monastic vows. In some cases, abandoned monasteries stood empty for years or were put to temporary uses, but without transfer of title: the confiscating parties let the previously entitled languish until more convenient legal circumstances of the sheer passage of time confirmed the new dominion.’[[410]](#footnote-410)

As stated above, the Reformation in England, in terms of popular action and theology, was fundamentally different to the reforming actions in Germany. As Ocker pointed out, German monastic houses often unofficially petered out rather than faced a concrete shutting, with some of the enclosed leaving through a changing moral understanding provoked by preachers and reformers. However, in terms of the visual and material cultures found within and that made up monasteries, the implications and enactment of inventories appear remarkable in the thematic similarities. Though not accompanied by evangelicals attempting to end monasticism, inventories were drawn up alongside reports by officials of moral laxity and, in some cases, extreme poverty due to mismanagement, with such reports being used retrospectively by both the Crown and Protestant reformers to justify the dissolving of these houses. Instigated by the Crown in the mid-to-late 1530s to evaluate the property of monastic houses across England, and leading to the establishment of the entirely new department of the Court of Augmentations to handle such a heavy influx of goods, inventories were one of, if not the first, external, governmental investigation into the visual and material worlds of monasteries that, though part of their local, practical and devotional communities, so often remained behind closed doors. The languishing remains asserted by Ocker also presens a mirror image to the Northern monasteries left bare and decaying in the Yorkshire landscape.

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The Dissolution of the monasteries has, unsurprisingly and not without good reason, been seen through the thousands of complicated textual and primarily legal documents that survive. For female monastic studies, the wealth of written sources provides not only something of a contrast to what has gone before, but an insight into the economic worlds of nuns almost impenetrable in previous decades. However, as Ocker’s work so fully and insightfully demonstrated, understanding the uses and outcomes of material sources from monasteries through this period adds another layer to our understanding of the sacramental and physical communities of the sixteenth century. This Germany-focused study will provide the comparison pieces to our English case studies, as the fate of material remains informs the continuation and reforming of communities post-Dissolution.

The records for Yorkshire convents, in terms of material culture detail, are not brimming with elaborate specifics or luxurious-sounding objects. This is, of course, no real surprise; the financial difficulties experienced by some of the female houses have been addressed at length by scholars as early as Eileen Power, pointing out that not one of these houses, in their augmentation records, owned even half as much as is necessary to exclude them from the Suppression of Lesser Houses in 1536.[[411]](#footnote-411) Even then, the little material culture of the Yorkshire Cistercians that we did know about – the Madonna at Esholt, for instance – often does not appear on these lists. It remains hard to say exactly why this is; the small number of material culture references we have for these women is too limited in number to be considered representative when making the judgement as to whether or not they have been consciously left off these official inventories, or whether they were broken, sold or hidden in monasteries. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that the inventories drawn up by their prioresses may not be entirely full; wills often contained material goods that arguably have roots in these monasteries, when in the post-Suppression period they appear infrequently.

What *can* be judged more certainly, however, is what the Crown officials considered important in their assessments, prompting understandings of how this material culture and its monastic surroundings were considered, and what was ignored. The primary concern, the first thing recorded in many of these accounts, is, predictably, the overall economic summation of the convent, followed by a cursory breakdown of the raw materials and a listing of the lands and rents owed to the priory. The tiny monastery of Ellerton, for example, is worth over an estimated 81lfor the lead ‘derived from the pulling down of said Priory’ (in comparison to the rest of the houses, a huge amount, with other estimations sitting around 20l), with the price of glass and timber recorded alongside the ominous precursor ‘obtained in pulling down the buildings.’[[412]](#footnote-412) Records of amounts of livestock, again somewhat unavoidably, take up much of the attention – it does not seem surprising that for a rural monastic community like Keldholme, lists of cows, oxen, calves and horses add up to more than 20l.[[413]](#footnote-413)

What is perhaps more interesting is the very slight attention paid to the material goods found inside – the odd mention of bells, silver plate, unspecified jewels, gilt chalices and goblets are placed within lists of cattle, wood and grain.[[414]](#footnote-414) One particular mention from Sinningthwaite’s records only confirms this idea of poverty and of these houses lacking anything to get materially excited about – ‘A chalice, wholly gilt, with its paten, weighing together 11oz, was all the plate belonging to the priory.”[[415]](#footnote-415) It does not appear very strange that this aspect of raw material-focus, rather than on the few treasures held, has been overlooked in historiography, with scholars choosing instead to focus on the wealthier and more ostentatious luxury emanating from some of the richer monastic houses (the movement of golden relics and bejewelled sacramental objects from the most established male Benedictine abbeys prompted a scandalised response from Cromwell’s men) and fitting the breakdown of these houses into a more national narrative of economic reasoning.[[416]](#footnote-416) It certainly appears that officials analysing these results were focused far more on the overall economic output that could be gained from the entire space, than simply the devotional and routine substance that made up the everyday. Yet for the Yorkshire Cistercians, the communal links, both spiritual and practical, can be seen in the demonstration of support and attempt at gaining land through the Cromwell letters throughout the mid-1530s. This theme of negotiation of devotional space and material continues in the Suppression’s immediate aftermath, with the land detailed in these records given away to families that may not have appealed for the land, but who none the less retain connections to it.

For the families that can be traced from these records, there appear several lines of connectivity to the houses of which they are in receipt. Sir Ralph Bulmer was the son of Sir John Bulmer, who was executed (as was his wife) after their involvement in the Pilgrimage of Grace.[[417]](#footnote-417) He bought, alongside John Thynne, Basedale in 1544.[[418]](#footnote-418) Like Sir George Darcy, Sir Ralph’s reinstatement as the heart of a prominent family suggests the same internal negotiations of power. As his star began to rise again in the 1540s, it is arguable that he was both attempting to regain some of the political status his family must have had before the Pilgrimage of Grace’s discredit, and manoeuvring into a prominent place for the retention of the ex-priory given the pious connections through his own family.

Rosedale and Keldholme were gifted to the Earl of Westmoreland; he did not emphasise a close family relationship, but he did write twice, presumably just to make certain his intention. Again, he was another member of a deeply established family and ‘a descendant of the founder’ of the monasteries, but, presumably, he understood the way in which the political wind was blowing. In staying loyal to the Crown during the Pilgrimage of Grace, which was believed ‘surprising’ considering his familial relationship to people so close involved in the rebellion, he preserved himself ‘from the infection of their traitorous poison.’[[419]](#footnote-419) The material remains of monasticism were negotiated into the hands of those who had always held connection to it, presupposing a change in devotional and local community, but not a concrete end. It appears that Ocker’s idea of the aristocracy’s communal connections to monasteries as ‘conditioning’ resistance and success when it came to the confiscation, movement and change of the material goods and material worlds of enclosure ring equally true in their Yorkshire counterparts, albeit on a much smaller but no less important scale.

The provisos on which land was granted in the North, the way in which the royal foundations of Dartford and Syon were manoeuvred, and the discrepancies between both, goes someway in explaining the understandings of the Crown of these enclosed monastic spaces. With Yorkshire houses consistently granted throughout the 1540s, reference is frequently made to the king through these land-leasing documents, detailing exactly how the land may now be used and when; in 1544 for example, Robert Hill is given tenement over the remains of Hampole Priory (“all the oxen, the meadows, the pasture land for feeding, the hidden - *opertanis* - out buildings”) except for the king and his heirs who reserve rights “over all woodland and hunting grounds.”[[420]](#footnote-420) The surrender deeds of Swine Priory in the late 1530s reflect the land-leasing documents it pre-shadows; the emphasis on ‘all pasture… mill houses and lakes’ suggests a summing up of the pastoral elements for later dispersal.[[421]](#footnote-421) This idea that the land was at the disposal of Henry VIII and his heirs suggests a conscious advancement, a legally binding advancement of royal power into, as stated before, land that had, up until then, been privately owned and had made up an arguably sacred communal space.

The legality of such secular involvement in the Dissolution of the monasteries is a difficult issue to assess, if perhaps it was not to put into practice. Martin Heale noted a subtle development of interventionalist policy between Crown and the Church from the turn of the sixteenth century regarding not only monastic internal leadership but also with monastic property, suggesting a marked but slow departure from canon law-protected monasteries to increased lay intervention.[[422]](#footnote-422) In quoting Steven Gunn, Heale drew parallels between increased lay involvement in the monastic affairs with which they had deep connections at the turn of the sixteenth century, and the 1530s, when the government ‘set out to extend royal power over the Church [and] to exploit the Church’s resources for their own benefit… and to accept that the clergy needed improving and that the laity, led by the king, had the right to tell them so.’[[423]](#footnote-423) Robert C. Palmer saw a similar connection through the changes in later 1520s and the break with Rome, which not only ‘remarkably expanded’ the king’s power with his declaration as supreme head of the English church, but placed this dramatically over a ‘dislocated’ property law.[[424]](#footnote-424) With Parliament as the High Court now able to make new law and acts accompanying the Act of Supremacy dismantling papal authority to be transferred to the king, laws regarding monastic property ‘constituted a massive incursion into the once-prohibited area of matters spiritual.’[[425]](#footnote-425)

The legality of the secularisation and lay uptake of these lands, then, has its roots in these three decades-worth of progression. Daniel Eppley drew parallels between the ‘medieval’ power struggles between Church and royal authority, and suggested that by 1540 the Crown was enjoying ‘exclusive authority over the appointment of bishops, regulation of the Church courts, approval of canon law, taxation of the clergy, visitation and discipline of the clergy (including the monasteries) and the seizure of ecclesiastical property.’ The secularisation of monastic lands, therefore, was the ‘culmination of long-standing trends within the English Church.’[[426]](#footnote-426) The idea of legal changes culminating in a more secure grasp on church property goes someway in explaining the lack of resistance from the majority of founders, but also in assessing why the reassertion of ownership of Yorkshire lands were prominent; with the Crown now fundamentally dismissing rights of Church property, the negotiation of land ownership took on a more urgent and necessary impetus.

While Yorkshire monastic land was negotiated into the hands of local aristocracy and gentry, keen to assert or reassert claims over material they were connected to, Dartford and Syon passed through the Dissolution in another way entirely. As royal foundations, both were unable to be reclaimed by their original founders or long-term patrons in 1539; the new legality of such royal reclaiming adds weight to a royal monastic foundation that it was less Church property, and had been less Church property since conception.Both were unable to remain in the devotional communal settings of which their monasteries had so far been an essential and central part. In the very early 1540s, the Crown set about reclaiming both properties and their extensive lands in its own name, distributing power of these sacramental places amongst the king’s nearest and closest community; Sir Richard Lange was appointed to the office of keeper of Dartford, now converted by the Crown into a conventual dwelling and hunting seat, in August 1540, before Thomas Seymour, brother of Henry’s late wife, was made keeper some eight years later.[[427]](#footnote-427) After the king’s death, Dartford Priory was gifted for residence of Anne of Cleves, enhancing these royal and aristocratic connections into areas that were beforehand unavailable. Interestingly, and furthering these connections of local community based around monastic materialism, Sir Ralf Vane, brother to the last prioress, was granted a joint share in the manor of Shipbourne that had lately belonged to the priory, only months after the final Suppression.[[428]](#footnote-428)

For Syon Abbey, the post-Dissolution picture remains broadly the same. The nuns crucially left, rather than were Suppressed; having never officially signed the Acknowledgement, the nuns make a visual statement of leaving with, presumably, heavy hearts but without being pushed to subservience. A number presumably left for their family homes and others retired to small communal groups waiting patiently for reinstatement, while Henry VIII retained much land for himself. Given that the lands of Syon were as geographically varied as the abbey was wealthy, he fostered connections in the South (as far as Devon) by gifting previously-monastic tenements.[[429]](#footnote-429) Strangely for an abbey of the size and status of Syon, but perhaps not for the rest of English convent life, historiography is sketchy on the actual goods grasped on the Dissolution; the Syon Cope makes its first appearance in the Syon records at this time, and, thanks to the remarkable scholarship of Christopher de Hamel, the list of surviving books has grown considerably from the information left by the inventories of female religious houses made at the Dissolution.[[430]](#footnote-430)

Though “we might hope to find the record of additional volumes… for the most part these lists reveal only collections of service books”, leaving our understanding of contemporary views of female monastic reading, and indeed, of any other material objects, limited at best.[[431]](#footnote-431) In the context of later sixteenth-century iconoclasm, and the general summation of scholarship that the Dissolution was merely the beginning of such ideological image-breaking, simply on a huge, national, governmentally-enforced scale, such gaps appear understandable: if the purpose and need for monasticism had been rejected, the absence of material culture from these enclosed houses in records seems the logical conclusion.

For more established and wealthy religious figures and their corresponding places of devotion, the breaking up of shrines across the country - at St Albans, of Our Lady at Walsingham, and in particular, the shrine to the politically troublesome St Thomas Becket, who had his saintly title removed by the Crown – appear to be an out-and-out rejection of traditional devotional communities, happening in contemporary years, demonstrated through the most physical of ways against the material and visual culture that influenced and made up these communities. The ‘House Book’, the monastic chronicle of Katherina Lemmel’s convent, described the devastation caused to her monastery by iconoclastic rioters, and it is similarly based firmly within the destruction and impious rejection of religious imagery and material:

“They stacked up piles of books and then lit them. They burned, drowned, tore up and ripped apart more than three thousand books… Oh how great and immeasurable the harm that has occurred to the pious fathers and their fine library of good and precious books… They perpetrated such disrespect and dishonour with the sacred objects and the images that it would have been a terror and a horror for a pious person to see. We had two very beautiful images of the Saviour in our choir, and they dashed them into ten pieces. They also hacked off the hands and the feet of the crucifixes… They had cut off the head of the image of our Lord. They had thrown the saints onto the manure heap, and they had dismantled the altar… And everything imaginable that belongs to a household – all of this they carried away.”[[432]](#footnote-432)

This violent destruction by villagers is, of course, different in scale and ideology from the governmental disbanding of the Dissolution. It is unlikely too that Sister Lemmel’s contemporary English nuns witnessed the governmental destruction of their own convents in a similar way – and if, by chance, they did see the demolishment, no record of it survives. Parallels can, however, be made between the convent narrative of this extreme iconoclasm by the Peasant’s Revolt and the Suppression of important relics and antique shrines across the country, but particularly pertaining to the especially public and politically uncomfortable saint tombs. Absences in the visitation records are, then, perhaps to be expected, when judging them from the perspective of violent protests abroad barely a decade before, and the wide spread of iconoclastic behaviour sweeping a continent undergoing reform. The visitation records and Suppression documents do not, for instance, detail the shrine to Richard Rolle at Hampole, though presumably such an edifice did exist, with the abbey being his burial place, nor the dissolving/removing of it.

Yet perhaps the government’s understanding of material and visual culture of female monasticism in this way, as the influencer and maker of these communities, and the way in which inventories and other legal sources reflect this, is only half right. The breaking down of the inventories as overall price, followed by the emphasis on raw materials and the occasional mention of jewels and silver, while never really addressing the devotional imagery that was so integral to an enclosed monastic life, might explain the Crown’s understanding of monasticism and the communities they were disbanding as a set of ‘things’ - things that once removed, destroyed, ignored and given away, might also remove and destroy the internal communities, and the communal connections of devotion and locality, that were built and guided by them.

*Conclusions*

Historians have often approached the Dissolution of the monasteries as a definitive and fundamental break. They are, in many ways, not wrong to do so; the dispersal of twelve thousand men and women from monastic communities, with their livelihoods institutionally suspended and their homes, nearly two hundred in number and among some of the grandest landmarks in sixteenth-century England, left to crumble or torn down for raw materials, has to provide evidence for this concrete Suppression of monasticism in England. Yet in terms of the communities affected, what made up and what continued to form communities was not, as argued in the first and second chapters of this work, made up primarily of the walls that surround the convent; similarly, the internal and external reactions to the Dissolution of these walls provided resistance to this Suppression and demonstrated understandings of monasticism that were not determined solely by the institutional and structural boundaries of their communities.

Through textual and material means, the understandings of community before and during the Suppression offer a different narrative to the ‘smash-and-grab’ aristocratic handling of ex-monastic land. The letters requesting consideration for the Yorkshire Cistercian houses display a negotiation of power plays with the Crown in an attempt to take some form of ownership over land that was often worth very little in terms of material and monetary terms, but that offered something less tangible. The spiritual dimensions of the proximity between the present with the founding families lends weight to the idea of a community invested in their spiritual, as well as practical, heritage. The lands of the Yorkshire Cistercians were demonstrative to these gentlemen of their communal links to their shared past, displaying the devotional communal connections that mattered as much as the acquisition of land.

For the nuns themselves, their reactions to the Dissolution are demonstrated, reasonably unsurprisingly, through texts, but in complementary ways; Syon’s engagement with Elizabeth Barton and the textual dimensions therein offer a precursor to their textual outputs in light of the Henrician Suppression, when their community is defined as one fully against external reforming forces. For Dartford Priory, their prioress’s astute and incisive writings not only presented their house as untied under her, their order and with each other, but she asserted a unified group as a base for a negotiation of power with Cromwell that allowed for helpful ambiguity and intelligent negotiation of the external situations. In comparison to the substantial writings of Charitas Pirckheimer, Syon Abbey and Dartford Priory can be seen to have formed their internal communities of the mid-to-late 1530s through writing, placing them in a broader culture and framework of female monastic resistance and community against the behaviour and arguments of those on the outside.

The Dissolution itself, with the assessment of material culture in the Court of Augmentation reports and the physical break down of the convents for raw materials, demonstrates the first moment that Crown authorities are allowed in an institutional way into the convents themselves. Their assessments of the land and related materials were a summing up before they were doled out, offering a moment to assert ownership through patronage of local men. But the material embodiments of the community that were summed up in these documents went further than just describing what the community held. In the 1530s, the communities that were based in and around these convent case-studies are heavily indebted to what surrounds and defines them, but it is not all they are. The resistance to Henry VIII’s policies through textual constructions, the contradictory negotiations that took place through cleverly-worded texts, and the context, implications and wider histories of the ‘scramble’ for monastic land that held far deeper connections than first assumed, all conform to the idea that though community is enhanced and explained through physical means, it is based more on the deeper spiritual principles that each of these means symbolise.

***Chapter Four: New Endings and New Beginnings: Communities after the Dissolution***

*Introduction*

In 1555, William Peryn, a Dominican preacher at Smithfields, London, wrote *Spirituall Exercyces and Godly Meditacions*, a work designed to be ‘very profitable for Religious, and generally for al other that leyte to come to the perfecte love of god, and to the contempt of the worlde.’[[433]](#footnote-433) It was a work heavily influenced by a post-Dissolution and Reformation mentalité; a translation and adaptation of the Flemish work of Nicholas Van Ess and based on Jesuit teachings, William Peryn’s *Exercyses* ‘was the fruit of religious exile with its consequent direct exposure to Continental writing and thought.’[[434]](#footnote-434) He dedicated the work ‘Unto the devoute and very religious Suster Katherin Palmer or the order of saincte Brigit in Dermonde and Suster Dorothe Clement of the order of sainct Clare in Louvaine,’ women who themselves played a prominent role in the devotional community of later sixteenth-century Europe, and specifically, England.

Two years after *Spirituall Exercyces* was written, Katherine Palmer returned to England as the elected abbess of a group of Bridgettines when asked by the Marian government to reform their original house of Syon Abbey. When William Peryn dedicated the work to her, Palmer the head of a group of Bridgettine nuns in Termonde in the Netherlands, and she resumed conventual life with them before being called back to England.[[435]](#footnote-435) A young member of the Bridgettine house at the Dissolution, Palmer had left England for a Continental life of exile, by remaining with her sisters, she demonstrated the persistence over the Edwardian period of Syon Abbey’s continuing spiritual connection.

Dorothy Clement similarly left England as a Catholic woman to take part in a devotionally exiled community; leaving with her parents during the reign of Edward VI, Clement became the only English woman in the Louvain house of St Clare, where she was living at the time of Peryn’s dedication.[[436]](#footnote-436) Unsurprisingly, she did not return to her homeland on Mary Tudor’s ascension to the throne, given that her monastic roots now lay in her Flemish convent, but her experience foreshadowed the experience of several English women who, during the latter half of the sixteenth century, travelled abroad to fulfil their conventual vocation. The fact that Peryn’s work was dedicated to both women, neither of whom were connected through close proximity or familial closeness, is further demonstration of the intangible but essential bonds of the devotional community of which they were a part. After the Dissolution of the monasteries, such a devotional community was continued, and was fulfilled, in these exiled monastic groups.

Mary C. Erler’s research into the lives of Palmer and Clement reveals even greater interconnections between female monastics in England in the decades after the Dissolution. In her seminal work *Women, Reading and Piety in Late Medieval England*, Erler addresses how both women owned copies of Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* from a 1494 Wynkyn de Worde edition. Additionally, both were named as beneficiaries in the will of Henry Joliffe, ‘a former chaplain to Queen Mary’ who, in 1573, left 20ls and 40 shillings to Dorothy and her convent sisters respectively, while bequeathing Katherine Palmer and the remains of Syon abroad £6.[[437]](#footnote-437) Both these examples point to a furthering and advancing of devotional communities into the later sixteenth century, and to women religious as a central, vibrant and active part.

These communal connections, however, go even further, suggesting additional engagement with the pre- and post-Dissolution devotional community. One year before Henry’s death, Erler points out that Dorothy and her more famous sister Margaret both received money (as well as twenty shillings for St Ursula’s, Margaret’s Continental convent, whom Henry Joliffe also left £3 6 shillings), from Thomas Harding, a prominent Catholic ‘controversialist’ who had been a professor at Oxford.[[438]](#footnote-438) Also gaining a cash sum was Elizabeth Woodford; Woodford appears in the history of St Monica’s nunnery in Louvain, which detailed her profession at Dartford Priory as an undoubtedly young novice in December 1519, before she joined St Ursula’s in 1540, continuing in her monastic life until her death.[[439]](#footnote-439) She is fitting of the tribute paid to her by Paul Lee, as ‘a striking example of commitment to the monastic life,’ but additionally, her involvement still advances, for a woman committed to Dartford Priory for twenty spiritually-formative years, an engagement within this devotional community, a connection further involving these post-Dissolution women.[[440]](#footnote-440)

This devotional community between ex-women religious and the outside world is once again seen through their relationships and actions after their second Suppression. William Peryn, helping to re-establish monasticism in England as part of the Marian restoration and prior of the Dominican friars at Smithfield, died before the Elizabethan Suppression, but his successor, Friar Hargrave, retained these connections with women religious. When, at the end of May 1559, Elizabeth Cressener and her sisters boarded the same boat as Katherine Palmer’s Syon nuns to begin communal monastic lives abroad, they did so with, and under the protection of, Hargrave. As so often in the study of late medieval and early modern nuns, sources are sketchy and sparse; they remain, however, when taken together, demonstrative of a connected, spiritually and collectively-assertive devotional community, even after the Suppression.

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Before the communities of these later sixteenth-century English nuns can be investigated, the context of Catholic communities within England must be understood; it is a deeply contested and dense field of scholarship, linking the Whig to post Revisionism addressed in this work’s introduction. In 1976, the publication of John Bossy’s now seminal *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* introduced a term with which much of this chapter will engage. Determining the relationships and connections of ‘a body of people… with its own internal structure and way of life,’ Bossy ‘[approached their religion] as “a continuum of behaviour rather than belief”, [tracing] the process by which the Catholic gentry and aristocracy progressively severed the bonds that united them with their neighbours and peers.’[[441]](#footnote-441) It was a community that purposefully separated itself from those physically proximate who did not share its belief, as he argued that though ‘Catholic rites disappeared from public view, they certainly did not cease to exist,’ they instead went underground: ‘they continued to be practised within Catholic communities, generally located on the estates of the gentry and including the entire household.’[[442]](#footnote-442) Andreas Höfele summed up Bossy’s understanding of the Catholic community’s engagement with England’s difficult religious past as ‘both backward and forward looking at the same time. While sticking with and cherishing ancient traditions and rites, Catholics also had to adapt their faith to modern conditions in the aftermath of the “death of the Church.”’[[443]](#footnote-443) This view of English Catholicism later into the second half of the sixteenth century has remained a prominent one; the idea that relationships were defined within recusancy networks, created and ‘fed’ from abroad by the arrival of Jesuits has influenced historiography of the period for decades.

The writings of Christopher Haigh and several other academics in the past twenty five years have challenged and added nuance to this understanding of religious politics in the years following the mid-sixteenth century, with Haigh attempting to join up, as it were, the two periods divided by previous study through understanding parishes and their inhabitants. Haigh in particular suggested that both ‘moments’ of Marian Catholicism and recusancy were linked by ‘the complex phenomenon now known as survivalism or Post-Catholicism: the early part of the reign of Elizabeth should not be seen as an unfortunate gap in the history of English Catholicism, but as the period in which the constituency from which later recusancy could be recruited was substantially maintained.’[[444]](#footnote-444) His argument that ‘it is essential for an understanding of these years to avoid a restrictive definition of Catholicism which stresses union with Rome and conscious rejection of a heretic Church of England,’ demonstrated the need for a wide interpretation of mid and later sixteenth-century Catholic faith and community. These are not fixed concepts, but both can interact and inform the other without necessarily consciously interconnecting with wider networks.

Immediately, this study of a devotional community made up of Catholic men and women throughout the Edwardian to Elizabethan periods diverges with the understanding, first put forward by Dickens, Aveling and Bossy, that ‘English medieval Catholicism died between 1543 and 1570, and thereafter a combination of spontaneous revival in England and missionary effort from the seminaries abroad created a new Catholic body.’[[445]](#footnote-445) Both approaches, that of the ‘death’ of the English Catholic community, and recusant-based ‘survivalism’ suffer from the historiographical trends latent in so much English Reformation and Dissolution scholarship; the harsh, period-ising break of the late medieval and early modern, symbolised for many by the closure of the monasteries within monastic study and by the Henrician Reformation for scholars of sixteenth-century England, not only challenges historians wanting to work across these boundaries, but creates artificial distinctions for their historical subjects. The communities of Syon Abbey, Dartford Priory and the Yorkshire Cistercians were not broken by the legal or ideological changes being made to their ways of life, but rather, as communities, reshaped their culture and grouping, demonstrating attempts (often successful attempts) at continuity with their pre-Dissolution lives.

Christopher Highley, in examining Catholic English identity while in Continental exile, offered a counter to this gulf of spirituality and community; in addressing the self-writing of exiles, he presented an understanding of them in a non-proximate but interconnected community, more consciously part of it because of their physical distinction than the other way around. He suggested that terms used to define and distinguish members or non-members of this Catholic community are ‘marked by internal compromise and resistance… [so that] the problem with trying to identify different groups within the Catholic community… are early modern polemical constructions than precise analytical categories.’[[446]](#footnote-446) He goes on to state the roles fulfilled by these exiles can only be viewed in a communal context: ‘exiles organised their lives in order to serve the perceived needs of the faithful back home, whether this meant praying for the reconversion of England, educating English youth in Continental establishments, or seeking military intervention from foreign rules to overthrow heresy in England.’[[447]](#footnote-447) This chapter will base its own understandings of community within Highley’s framework.

Firmly linked to this understanding of Catholicism in the mid-sixteenth century is the study of the Marian church, which, until recently, ‘has represented [religion in England under Mary] as highly reactionary, full of the grossest superstition, as it was depicted by [Protestant] John Foxe.’[[448]](#footnote-448) G. R. Elton and A. G. Dickens, ‘arguably the most eminent and influential Tudor historians in the second half of the twentieth century’ (as well as providing two bodies of work from which revisionist historiography has so frequently gone forth) argued both that any advancements and reforms Mary hoped and tried to make ‘were doomed’, and that ‘her reign must be judged a huge failure, but one likely to have become more monumental with every succeeding year.’[[449]](#footnote-449)

Within the last twenty five years, however, historians have attempted, in line with the revisionism of the English Reformation and the debunking of several myths attached to it, to challenge this narrative of a ‘backward-looking, unimaginative, reactionary [Church], sharing both the Queen’s bitter preoccupation with the past and her tragic sterility.’[[450]](#footnote-450) Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars*, one of the first and most influential to contest this scholarship, suggested that the ‘restoration of Catholicism had, in fact, displayed high levels of determination and resourcefulness, and that… in many instances, the key policies of the regime anticipated or directly inspired later Counter-Reformation developments.’[[451]](#footnote-451) Exploring her roles within pastoral care, theological interpretation and sacramental thinking, historians have defined her reign as a ‘reformed Catholicism’ within Christian Humanism of the 1530s, or have gone further still, suggesting a ‘subtle and enlightened school of theology which endeavoured to utilise all the best thinking of the past twenty years… while remaining firmly insular [to England] and detached from contemporary movements on the continent.’[[452]](#footnote-452)

An important aspect for this study, particularly in light of this trend towards viewing Marian Catholicism and Marian England as removed and singular, and with a view to exploring the forward-facing nature of her religious policies, is the scholarly treatment of the Marian reinstatement of monasticism. It remains an issue somewhat paradoxically situated in historiography more generally – while Mary and Cardinal Pole’s relationship to religious foundations has been broadly overlooked by scholars, at the same time ‘there has been a feeling that the available effort and expense was directed to reviving flawed institutions of the past, rather than harnessing forward-looking aspects of the Counter Reformation.’[[453]](#footnote-453) While this negative attention is understandable from the broadly Protestant-focused and written historiography up to the later twentieth century, the emphasis is only slightly different in revisionist scholarship. The general understanding that pervades the Marian restoration of the monasteries is one of half-indifference in the implementation and failure in the intention. Andrew Pettegree suggested that her restorations were both small-scale and ‘almost look like acts of filial piety, as she concentrated on houses like those of the Franciscan Observants or that at Sion which has been at the centre of her mother’s circle of supporters.’[[454]](#footnote-454) David Loades, one of the most renowned scholars of Mary’s religious ideals and impetuses, summed up: ‘she seems to have very little interest in the revival of the monastic opus dei.’[[455]](#footnote-455) Critics point to the small number of houses reformed in comparison to the huge number closed by her father, the small amounts left to them in her will and the emphasis that Pole placed instead on reforming parishes rather than rolling out monastic restoration across the country.

It is not a pervading claim, however, that has gone uncriticised. Richard Rex and William Wizeman pointed out that though six monasteries is not vast, this was by no means a failure in number (Henry V, a monarch deemed hugely successful in kingship terms and a noted advocate of monasticism, only managed to found two of the three houses he planned before his death) or in intention (‘these communities were noted for their commitment to the renewal of monastic and mendicant life, a movement that was growing in early modern Catholic Europe’).[[456]](#footnote-456) When discussing the restoration of Syon Abbey and its contemporaries, Jones and Walsham make a convincing case for the role monasticism played, and could further have played, if circumstances had been altered, and the Counter Reformation under Mary could have secured a more stable footing:

“The role of the restoration of Syon, Sheen and several other religious houses… in this story has so far been rather neglected, but deserves greater attention; it was probably more central to Pole’s plans for the spiritual rejuvenation of the nation than sceptical commentators such as David Loades have supposed. Had Mary lived longer, these and other revived monasteries might indeed have become ‘power houses’ of Catholic reform. As it was, her premature death brought Pole’s embryonic project to an abrupt halt.”[[457]](#footnote-457)

It remains fair to assume, then, that the Marian restoration of the monasteries was neither a grand, ideological movement to reinstatement monasticism on a national scale, nor a fairly pathetic, failed attempt to bring back institutions for which there was little enthusiasm. Until relatively recently, the study of monastic men and particularly women after the Suppression of their houses remained locked in a similar narrative of decline, failure and indulgence. As the previous chapter argued, the Dissolution remained an overlooked and somewhat glossed-over aspect of the English Reformation, being neither incorporated in great depth by revisionist scholarship nor given much attention by a Whig-ish narrative. Neither the strength of community after the Dissolution nor the engagement with the women of Dartford and Syon after their reinstatement, managed to convince or attract the attention of these scholars; despite acknowledging that ‘each house seems to have been created on the initiative and petition of a group of ex-religious who wished to return to the cloister’ and that ‘[all six houses] attracted a few recruits, and a handful of novices,’ Loades remains unconvinced, saying instead that ‘there is no evidence to suggest that a backlog of unsatisfied religious vocations existed in England, and the impact of these houses on the spiritual life of the church, even in their immediate neighbourhood, seems to have been small.’[[458]](#footnote-458)

In the past thirty years, however, the lives of the ex-enclosed, from their immediate turning out of the monasteries to potential exile on the continent, have been examined in both a greater depth and with a greater level of sympathy for exactly what their post-Dissolution lives meant with regards to their pre-Suppression existence. The ground-breaking archival work of Claire Cross and Noreen Vickers in investigating the later lives of Yorkshire monastics has given way not only to a broader uptake of interest in this field, but also to challenging or, at least, attempting to fill the silence left by historians not keen to examine the lives of dissolute and under-achieving monasteries and their inhabitants.

Marilyn Oliva, Paul Lee and Mary C. Erler have, in different ways, each examined the impact of Suppression on nuns and their subsequent lives afterwards; through the lens of proximate community roles and engagement, Oliva points to the economic situation of Norwich nuns as difficult, but their survival in small groups, with many unable (or unwilling) to return to their families, is aided by communal sharing, communal employment and economic support from members of the locality.[[459]](#footnote-459) Lee and Erler, both focused on the spiritual and practical aspects of book exchange and readership, use the evidence of what the books contained, where they were read and where they ended up in order to demonstrate continued links between the women and their roles within a devotional community. Scholars working more exclusively on Syon Abbey have provided some of the most compelling evidence for the strength of communal bonds between the Bridgettine nuns through shared homes and reading material. Furthermore, the aspects of re-foundation and exile have added dimensions to the study of this Bridgettine house and its Dominican equivalent that transport the study of sixteenth-century ex-nuns into a truly European and interconnected early modern world. The innovative scholarship of Claire Walker, Nicky Hallett and Caroline Bowden has shed much-needed and exciting light on the political networks of women religious in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century, examinations of themselves, their histories and their spirituality through their own writings, and the agency of these women in challenging environments.[[460]](#footnote-460)

It is within this body of scholarship that this chapter will be presented. Examining the three case-studies of Dartford Priory, Syon Abbey and the Yorkshire Cistercians, this chapter will examine the reforming communities of ex-nuns no longer bound by enclosure but through their links to their faith and each other. Community provided these dispersed women religious with the abilities and relationships needed to continue in secular lives. Community provided the underpinning of the re-foundations of Dartford Priory and Syon Abbey. Community, further, presented a connection with the faith of the past even when far from physical proximity to England, for the men and women within recusant networks.

In examining culturally-significant and highly personal sources, this chapter will assess letters written by the women themselves, wills of the women and those referencing them, texts dedicated to them and used by them, and biographies of these women used in their own communities and those of men and women in a wider English community. Often, these sources only infer oblique connections – such as the ones that begin this chapter – but these connections are evidential of a wide-reaching and symbolic devotional community; the chapter will examine the place that these convents had in the English Catholic networks both at home and abroad.

For the purposes of this chapter, ‘community’ will be understood as Christopher Highley, Anthony Cohen and Jan Assman have defined it. Cohen defined ‘imagined communities’ as formed by common ways of behaving (and thinking) in the creation of symbolic boundaries, boundaries that are understood differently by those involved but through which their members identify themselves.[[461]](#footnote-461) For the English women religious abroad or turned out of their enclosure, the strength of their immediate monastic community was created by boundaries of similarity and consciousness as Catholic women, not necessarily proximity. Jan Assman’s understandings of the importance of the reassertion of these boundaries, in the repetition of memory, chimes with exiled women religious reasserting their English-ness through the networks back home. As Highley further suggested, the women within these communities are conscious of their roles, particularly with regard to those to whom they might not be proximate, but who they feel are a deeply involved member of their chosen and conscious network.

The purpose of this chapter is not to neatly conclude the lives of these nuns at the end of the 1500s, but to understand the fragmented communal experiences that they underwent in the last decades of the sixteenth century. This chapter will be structured chronologically, following at first three case studies, then only two; Dartford and Syon’s reinstatement and exile, however strong their communities and communal identities, are unrepresentative of the broader, somewhat quieter version of life after Dissolution of most women religious. The Yorkshire Cistercians, solidly integrated into their environment and locality, without the Continental relationships of their Bridgettine and Dominican sisters and, generally, poorly endowed, were without the means to reform under Mary, and without any European connections on which to capitalise on. They are, through this, representative of the majority of women religious, and present a continuation of this comparative dimension within the devotional community of ex-nuns in the post-Dissolution period.

With historiography so frequently ending with this period in these women’s lives, this chapter challenges the existing, overriding narrative of the Dissolution and the Reformation in England, contributing to what Paul Lee has described as ‘the growing scholarly consensus that female monasteries were not in a uniform state of decay by the sixteenth century.’[[462]](#footnote-462) By addressing the monastic female communities as they remain in contact with each other, choose lives with each other and build further communities with women around them, this chapter will challenge the overriding narrative of the Dissolution and Reformation in England as that of harsh breaks and solid endings. Instead, this chapter, starting at the point at which so much historiography ends, will argue that the continuity shown in and through these communities should be seen as a contesting theory. Furthermore, it connects these immediately post-Suppression lives with the involved and superb work being done for the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The communal contexts of these ex-religious will continue the process of transformation and re-figuration, already beginning, as stated in the third chapter of this work, before and during the Suppression; the communities that remained in small, loose but undeniable forms were no longer bound by literary works that guided their religiosity or practical involvement with the world, informed by their visual and material cultures that surrounded them daily, or that sacramentally defined them. Community, whether confined in physical and institutional groups or through the more oblique but connected understandings of reading material and visual surroundings, provides the lens through which these post-Suppression women should and needs to be seen.

*Secular Transitions in the Post-Suppression Period*

Amy Leonard, in her extensive work on German women facing the Reformation, outlines the immediate impetus placed on ex-nuns when facing the Suppression of their homes: ‘Women had several options: to accept Reformation and give up conventual life… to emigrate to a Catholic area… to leave the convent but continue to live communally outside the walls, or to resist, and stay in their houses.’[[463]](#footnote-463) For their English contemporary equivalents at Dartford Priory, Syon Abbey and in the Yorkshire Cistercian houses, all but the first option was seized upon, and it is the third choice, that of communal living through secular transition, that this section will explore. The secular transitions for these single women was that of re-entering the secular world without an institutional or permanent role. Few women married after the Suppression of their houses, but this is not in itself primarily evidence of their desire to choose instead a communal, reinvented monastic life. Legally, women were bound by the monastic vow of chastity until 1549, a loophole closed by the Edwardian government; G. W. Bernard suggested, in his systematic analysis of the Six Articles, that it ‘did not modify, let alone reverse’ any of the Henrician earlier reforms and that all the fourth article did, in asserting the binding vows of chastity, was ‘to disappoint those who saw the Dissolution of the monasteries as synonymous with the rejection of monastic celibacy.’[[464]](#footnote-464) Whereas German nuns had had to endure, or fervently welcomed, Lutheran notions of ‘denying the spiritual superiority of celibacy… [challenging] one of the key expressions of Catholicism and the only institutional role in Christianity open to women: the monastic life’, ex-enclosed women in England, for a decade, were left in a limbo of single but tenuous lives.[[465]](#footnote-465)

The new church in England, as Oliva suggested, ‘thereby restricted [women] to the more isolated and private spheres of family’; for those for whom this was not a viable or preferable option, then, a communal life together appears to have been both the desirable and more frequently chosen alternative.[[466]](#footnote-466) While a very small number of ex-nuns (only seven from the entire county of Yorkshire) appear to have flouted the law and, while more may have married after 1549, there is little evidence to suggest that many took ‘advantage of this new freedom.’[[467]](#footnote-467) What does remain, however, and what will be explored in this section, is the commitment of many women religious, particularly of Dartford Priory, Syon Abbey and the Yorkshire Cistercian houses, who, despite the hardships of poverty and without the community-defining boundaries that had informed and made up their communal identities for so long, remained banded together or in contact. This section will argue that, through these connections, a reinvention of monastic understanding can be viewed through the lens of fractured but spiritually and physically connected community.

Syon Abbey was not officially dissolved in 1539. Unlike all of its contemporaries, the Suppression papers of the convent were never signed, meaning that, though the practicality of Dissolution went ahead, something of a decidedly small, but nevertheless still present, victory was obtained for the women who had, for the past decade, resisted attempts to control their religiosity and political persuasion.[[468]](#footnote-468) The fate of the sisters, who for over a century had ‘symbolised a view of monasticism and the religious life’ as stringent, vibrant and intellectual, who had printed, commissioned and read work ‘as politically charged and historically specific as… anti-monastic satire’, faced, immediately at least, a remarkably similar fate to hundreds of women across the country.[[469]](#footnote-469) Peter Curich’s convincing assertion that ‘like all large institutions, the English monasteries have developed a corporate image in the minds of historians… [but] in reality, [they] were home to many thousands of individuals who, when faced with crisis, made personal responses and chose different courses of action’, appears contradicted by the fact that the majority of women religious in this study, on being turned out of their homes, remained communally connected.[[470]](#footnote-470)

Agnes Jordan, the abbess and a predominant figure in Syon Abbey’s last years at the forefront of their spiritual and political activity, was given the largest pension of any of her fellow women religious.[[471]](#footnote-471) This pension sustained the small band of ex-Syon nuns in a farmhouse near Denham, Buckinghamshire, while Katherine Palmer took a further group abroad, as addressed above.[[472]](#footnote-472) On Jordan’s death in the mid-1540s, Palmer returned, leading her sisters across the Channel to reunite the women of Syon Abbey in her European Bridgettine convent, causing Erler to believe that the dependants of Jordan were financially supported by their abbess in a way they could not sustain without her.[[473]](#footnote-473) This likelihood, and Jordan’s community, present two strong assertions regarding their communal strengths: firstly, the financial dependence on and support of Jordan continued the community-centricity displayed during her Abbess-hood, when the religiosity that Syon endorsed supported a vibrant spiritual and practical community. Secondly, Palmer’s return for her old sisters suggests not only a practical keeping-in-touch, but a vocational calling of care within and for the community they belonged to.

The story of the women of Dartford Priory remains remarkably similar, with one crucial difference. Elizabeth Cressener Junior, the niece of their late abbess Elizabeth Cressener Senior, rented a home at Sutton at Hone with six of her former sisters, including Agnes Roper, clearly a long-serving and respected nun, given her six pound pension.[[474]](#footnote-474) Lee’s research also pointed to a couple choosing instead to move in together to Walsingham, potentially due to its place ‘as one of the most popular centres of late medieval religious devotion and pilgrimage.’[[475]](#footnote-475) He suggests further that there may have been more groups of former Dartford sisters living together in similar ways, though evidence is lacking.[[476]](#footnote-476) Seen in tandem with Syon, this summation is compelling, demonstrative of strongly connected women bound by something more than their institutional boundaries.

What does mark Dartford out as having a distinct experience from those at Syon, however, is the lack of their last abbess in these new communities – Joan Fane, backed by Cromwell as an appropriate choice to replace Cressener’s fifty-years of Dartford experience, was not a member of Cressener Junior’s house. The probable daughter of Humfrey Fane of Hildon near Tunbridge, and sister of Ralph Fane of Hadlow, Joan Fane’s male relations became beneficiaries of the land of Dartford in the renegotiation for the Priory’s land, having held leases given in the last months of the Priory’s life.[[477]](#footnote-477) Fane appears to disappear from their communities and, indeed, from records after the Suppression. The strong likelihood, then, as convincingly suggested by Paul Lee, is that Joan went back to her family with a large £100 pension, a family which continued to be involved and advanced by a relationship with the Henrician government.[[478]](#footnote-478) Erler points out, in her case-study of Fane as one of Cromwell’s nuns, her family connections both to Edwardian political echelons and, later, her somewhat ironic link to a sister-in-law whom John Foxe called ‘a special nurse and a great supporter’ of Protestant controversialists, implying the familial sympathies of the Fanes to reforming rhetoric and politics might have been significant in Joan’s separation from her sisters.[[479]](#footnote-479)

Given that so many of Dartford’s inhabitants remained together, or connected to such a point that they were able to reform twenty years later, Fane’s separateness does suggest something of a disharmony. The fact that all she leaves behind, too, is a single letter, does not help aid the analysis of her and her community’s feelings towards each other and the enclosed life. However, the previous chapter in this work has assessed Fane’s own negotiation of power in the very last months of Dartford’s existence – when she succeeded Cressener, she makes a plea to her powerful supporter for the admittance of a young novice to join their community by linguistically inciting the memory of her revered predecessor and their unity as a convent. Fane obviously left her community at the Dissolution, but her actions before this, the demonstration of communal feeling and a seemingly sincere commitment to the spiritual and practical well-being of those around her (even if the letter is only a fleeting and potentially unrepresentative glimpse) suggest a community consciousness. Even though she did not remain with her sisters, just as many other nuns did not stay with theirs, it is arguable that this community consciousness was not altogether extinguished or unfelt.

The fact that many women religious, particularly from these three case studies and including the ones with a clear and present aristocratic background, did not return home to their parents but instead chose to stay with their spiritual sisters, further underlines the strength of communal commitment between them. Alongside the relatively few ex-nuns who chose to marry (for whom we have evidence), this rejection of family and domesticity connects them with their sisters on the continent, battling ideological reform that sought to undermine their very existence, placing them instead under the subjugation of fathers, brothers and husbands. For every model of a Katherine von Bora-esque figure who left her convent, thrilled to experience spiritual fulfilment through the wholesomeness of marriage and family as opposed to the wantonness she had witnessed when enclosed, there remained those who openly rejected the Lutheran ‘freedom’ and emancipation. The writings of Ursula of Munserberg and Martha Elisabeth Zitter provide excellent demonstrations of these Reformer accounts, but evidence also remains of strongly gendered resistance to these changing dynamics, not least from those who it claimed to benefit the most: women religious.[[480]](#footnote-480)

Luther’s rejection of the monastic life, based in part on the practical and moral issues of celibacy, gave way to what Lyndal Roper calls a ‘continuity provided by hierarchical gender relations’: with Reformation teachings taking ‘such a solid and swift root in German society,’ through the ‘continuation of the patriarchal systems embedded in both family relations and societal institutions,’ the Reformation ‘was domesticated as it closed convents and encouraged nuns to marry, as it lauded the married state… and as it execrated the prostitute – so it was accomplished through a politics of reinscribing women within the ‘family’.’[[481]](#footnote-481) Placing women at the ‘bedrock of society’, Lutheran rhetoric was ‘clear about the role they envisioned for women: they were wives and mothers’ who were to be freed from a ‘medieval characterisation of [them] and their supposed inferiority.’[[482]](#footnote-482) For Amy Leonard in her study of Catholic nuns in Reformation Germany, it is clear that Luther and his fellow reformers felt themselves to be ‘liberating them from a misogynist system’ at the same moment as keeping them safely behind domestic walls.[[483]](#footnote-483) Women in England had their vow of celibacy enforced in the aftermath of Dissolution, but it appears that had such a ban been lifted, and marriage actively encouraged, the tiny numbers taking up marriage may not have increased.

We can see in the correspondence between male Reformer sympathisers with enclosed women that such reproaches on their lives and encouragement to leave were not taken lying down, and did so not as an individual, but as a defiant ‘we’. A letter written by a nun of St Katherine’s in Augsberg gives assertive voice to this rejection of the patriarchal values being established through Reforming rhetoric. In writing to her brother, admonishing him a ‘false prophet’, Katherine Rem staunchly and with gusto defends her and her niece’s decision to stay in their convent, clearly despite unwelcome ‘advice’ as to the opposite: ‘…you have said that your daughter and I are to you more as if we were in a brothel than in a convent... It would be better if you mulled this over…. If you don’t come [to us] in kinship, stay out. If you want to straighten us out, then we don’t want your [message] at all.’ She rejects the books he has sent to her, which presumably include this Reforming ideology: ‘You may not send us such things anymore. We will not accept them. We also have many good books [already].’[[484]](#footnote-484)

The last surviving letter that was sent to Katerina Lemmel betrays again this understanding of men advising religious women on the rightness (or indeed wrongness) of their vocation, though the terms are noticeably less antagonistic. Appearing to be reconsidering the merits of monasticism generally, Christoph Fürer does not suggest Katerina leave to fulfil any womanly duties, but does undermine her abilities to find spiritual fulfilment and provide spiritual services from her enclosure (arguably the most important and practical dimensions of female monastic community): ‘Therefore you monks and nuns cannot draw any comfort or assurance from your work; rather, I unfortunately am concerned that you sin more in such pretentious works than you do good with them.’[[485]](#footnote-485)

As mentioned previously, Charitas Pirckheimer recalls the wailing of young women whose families turned up at the convent door to forcibly remove their daughters from the monastic life, the stories of depression when they were returned home and the misery of the remaining community for their losses: ‘the wild wolves and she-wolves came among my beloved little lambs… then they wanted me to forcefully order the children to come out on their own, which I refused to do… The entire convent wept and wailed, because these were pious and clever children who remained with us willingly and in heart and soul did not want to leave us.’[[486]](#footnote-486) It has been asserted before, of course, that studies of English nuns have no such sources to display anxiety to being separated, hatred of those enforcing the separation and anger at their reasons for doing so, but this comparison goes some way in explaining the strength of these monastic communities over the domestic subalternity of life under the authority of their male relatives, especially for monastic women whose strength of devotion formed their community.

For the Yorkshire Cistercians, their transition to secular life differs again from their southern, single-house contemporaries. The fact that this case study is made up of 12 individual convents, rather than a single order house complicates the understanding of their communities post-Dissolution. So too does the fact that even the most expansive is still less than half the economic size of those closed at the Minor Suppression (or exempted from this). Despite these difficulties, however, the secular transitions of the Yorkshire Cistercians – and ex-enclosed women in Yorkshire more generally – have been the most often cited in asserting friendships that lasted beyond the Suppression, as demonstrative of connections for all suppressed convents. Claire Cross, the authority on so many aspects of the late medieval church, has researched these Cistercian women exhaustively, and in doing so, has illuminated the mid-sixteenth century as a period of transition and communal retirement for ex-nuns.

Through her examination of wills and pension claimant records, Cross revealed a prominence of traditional religion and interconnections. Katherine Nandyke’s will of 1541 left 6s and 8d to ‘eight of my sisters that was professed in Wykeham abbey’, and the more distinct gift of 5s and a ‘basin’ to fellow sister Isabel Percy.[[487]](#footnote-487) Katherine Foster gave her ‘best gown’ to a former sister at Sinningthwaite, as well as making her executor of her will.[[488]](#footnote-488) Most famous is the example given of Elizabeth Thorne, a nun at Swine who during the Marian reign left her house in Hull to her fellow former enclosed, Elizabeth Patricke.[[489]](#footnote-489) The example of former prioress of Kirklees who retired, accordingly to the locals, with four of her sisters to a house in Mirfield is further demonstration of them having ‘preserved some sort of communal life.’[[490]](#footnote-490)

It should be pointed out that many Yorkshire women are both unaccounted for or appear to have retired back home or on their own. The evidence, Cross reminds us, remains piecemeal and scarce, but provides something of a beam of light into an otherwise darkly fractured period. Cross’s work has been used by Lee, Oliva and Erler to further their analyses of what happened to their female subjects after the Dissolution, suggesting broadly that even in small and poorly endowed convents of frequently less than a dozen people, women wanted to remain together, or kept in loose contact throughout their lives because of the bonds formed by their enclosed pasts. Oliva, in addressing the pension claimant records of Norwich, pointed out that not only did many ex-nuns remember their monastic friends in their wills, requesting prayers for the soul and making gifts to high altars, but that they frequently referred to themselves as ‘good Catholic women’.[[491]](#footnote-491) What, she maintained ‘may have been anachronistic to some – perhaps most? – clearly signified not only an abiding faith in the old religion, but also a tenacious self-perception of their status as religious women. Such self-identification combined with communal living arrangements undoubtedly provided a measure of stability to an otherwise unsafe passage to secular life.’[[492]](#footnote-492) Taken together, the evidence presented by the Yorkshire Cistercian nuns, and especially when seen alongside contemporary evidence, remains compelling proof of the strength of the communal feelings and the practical loyalties held between these sisters.

This is not, however, all that this post-Suppression evidence and these narratives demonstrate. It was argued by Cross that it is not beyond possibility that women who retired together might well have maintained some form of monastic community for themselves, and especially on the strength of their pre-Dissolution religiosity, for each of this thesis’s case-studies, it appears not only plausible, but probable.[[493]](#footnote-493) Theirs were not simply continued communities, but ones demonstrating a further transformation; often without the structure, both spiritual and institutional, of previous centuries, their communities furthered a Continental history of re-figuration and negotiation of community. For Dartford and Syon, their commitment to their monastic life, clear from their willingness to be reinstated and the interconnectedness of their inhabitants so long after their Suppression, supports a narrative of quiet, enclosed continuation. Lee further suggests that, ‘in the hostile religious climate of the 1540s and 1550s, certain Catholic-minded inhabitants of Sutton at Hone demonstrated that they perceived Stroddel [a Dominican monk who was acting as spiritual guardian and adviser to the former Dartford inhabitants] and the former nuns as… symbolically representative of traditional religion,’ presumably through their practical involvement, or distance, from their localities.[[494]](#footnote-494)

As argued in the previous chapter, the textual and practical ways in which these nuns appealed and manoeuvred politics surrounding the Dissolution feed into this narrative of continuation – Bell draws attention to nuns who managed to keep three spiritually imperative and typically devotional pieces from Syon’s library:

“Dorothy Coderington, a nun at Syon at the time of its suppression… and a member of the house during the Marian revival, owned, annotated and corrected a printed copy of The Tree and Twelve Fruits of the Holy Ghost… Clemence Tresham, who… was also a nun at the Abbey both before and after its Suppression, owned the manuscript which contains the unique copy of John Cressener’s Sawter of Mercy… Catherine Palmer, a remarkable young women who led her nuns out from Syon into the wilderness… before being appointed abbess of the restored community in 1557, wrote her name in a printed copy of Laurentius Surius’s Latin translation of the sermon of Johan Tauler.’[[495]](#footnote-495)

When viewed together, too, this suggests a more subtle renegotiation of their communal role. The spiritual role played by Stroddel and eventually Hargrave on behalf of communities that managed to hold onto at least a small number of spiritual texts suggests a restructuring and regeneration of enclosed and actively religious groups who refused to reject their vocation.

As the previous chapter asserted, the women of Syon Abbey were within a precedent of resistance and refusal to bow to authority. The commitment of some of Syon Abbey’s former women religious to a monastic life, rather than simply communal retirement, is demonstrated in their near immediate move abroad, facing dramatic uncertainty but with the certain knowledge of their sacramental monasticism continuing in a similar vein. The movement of books and the Syon Cope (whose existence we first learn about in records in the Dissolution’s visitations) abroad with the sisters furthers both this commitment to the spirituality and learning that has consistently characterised their house and order, but also, to their commitment to the community as a whole, by holding close the very items that help form and reform their bonds.

The continuation of the Yorkshire Cistercians as a community was the hardest to achieve, but perhaps the most relevant in demonstrating the strength of communal vocation. Throughout the wills of the Yorkshire nuns, links can be firmly seen that reference a commitment to the kind of traditional, devotional-community-type of spirituality for which their convents, and the other nunneries of this study, were famous: Joan Harkey of Ellerton left money ‘to every priest dwelling in Richmond… to pray for me at my burial, and priests without town, that cometh to my burial… [and] to four widows… to watch to the time that my body be buried, and to pray for me.’[[496]](#footnote-496) She further entrusts her soul ‘unto Almighty God, and our Lady Saint Mary, and to all the saints in heaven to pray for me, and my bones to be buried in the church of Richmond on Our Lady side.’[[497]](#footnote-497)

The reference to a couple of nuns as ‘late prioress’ or ‘late sub prioress’ by members of their localities in bequests further this idea of a local community understanding the nuns’ identities as very much a continuation of the convent life; while the small number of these remembrances might not be totally representative, the comparison to other places in the country, like Oliva’s example, suggests a continuation of this theme.[[498]](#footnote-498) Furthermore, the ‘late sub prioress’, Jane Gascoigne of Hampole, is left very grand-sounding goods and not a small amount of more than six pounds by her brother, perhaps inferring pride or at least a sense of acknowledgement of the status that clearly still defined her, and her to him.[[499]](#footnote-499) (Interestingly, and in something of a contrast, Elizabeth Cressener Junior’s mother Eleanor, leaving her money and several goods in 1540, refers to her merely as Dame, without referencing her monastic status).[[500]](#footnote-500)

It should be noted that not every nun made a will, and that those who did did not always remember their old sisters, or even their commitment to traditional religion within them, proving that such bonds were not automatic or definitive. However, when compared to similar women across the country, and especially when seen in light of their extreme poverty, it does suggest a certain strength of community commitment that continued through spirituality and practicality. Without the same textual and visual cultures that have informed and defined Dartford and Syon over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there remains even greater proof of their strength of community and commitment to a semi-monastic life, as their communities were tested but reformed without the spiritual materials or sacramental necessities they had previously held.

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Cross asserts that the last nun of a Yorkshire Cistercian convent, Isabel Coxon, died in 1602, sixty three years after her house of Hampole had been suppressed, and thus ends the records of the female Yorkshire Cistercians.[[501]](#footnote-501) It seems an appropriate place to end this section of secular transitions with these Cistercian women, the only one of these three case-studies that managed it, either through necessity or choice, in a successful way. Syon rejected this secular life outright in a physical and demonstrable way, while Dartford nearly entirely remained committed to the reinstatement of their convent life under the leadership of a female successor, both in name and aptitude, of their former life. The wills of the ex-enclosed in the Yorkshire houses suggest a quieter commitment to each other and their localities, as demonstrated throughout their histories and particularly the sixteenth century.

The textual community, as outlined in Chapter One, may have revolved around a single manuscript but even then, it is demonstrative of a practical commitment to the men and women in their locality, the spiritual welfare of the women in the houses and the way in which this devotional community informed both. The visual culture underlines even further this interconnection between the secular and religious, with both combining in a not-always contradictory way to support and define their communities. As Chapter Three outlined, the renegotiation of power through monastic land reinstatement suggested a secure connection between the Yorkshire Cistercian houses with their secular histories, and vice versa – that the lay people who had been involved in their foundation could and wished to reclaim the spiritual and practical benefits through connections to them in the mid-sixteenth century. The women of the Yorkshire Cistercian houses were, and always had been, deeply connected into the Yorkshire landscape, mirroring their monastic forebears of the Cistercian isolated and removed tradition, yet the practical implications of female monastic religiosity informed a deeply held relationship with each other and those around them. It is unsurprising then, that without the aspects that so defined, created and continued the communities of Dartford Priory and Syon Abbey, the Yorkshire Cistercian women were still able to continue in their small, connected communities in the localities to which they had played a vital spiritual and practical role for several centuries.

*Re-foundation and Continuations*

In 1557, Dartford Priory was refounded, along with five other monastic houses, in a grant allowing ‘the prioress [Elizabeth Cressener] and convent of the order of St Dominic of Langley Regis’ to buy lands, have a common seal and plead causes in any courts.[[502]](#footnote-502) What marked it out from its contemporary reinstated convent, Syon Abbey, was that it appears to have been negotiated by the women themselves. C.F.R. Palmer states that ‘Seven of the Sisters banded together petitioned King Philip and Queen Mary that they might be restored to conventual and religious life according to their profession.’[[503]](#footnote-503) The nuns were, as we know from the Patents of Philip and Mary, granted through legal means lands and buildings within which to officially refound their community in 1557, before eventually being dissolved again under Elizabeth three years later. The matter of the petition from Cressener and her sisters, however, is a contentious one. It appears unclear in historiography exactly where this first originates, and, in the oft-quoted Palmer article, there is no reference to a source detailing Cressener’s letter asking the Catholic king and queen for official recognition of her ex-religious women.

In the older secondary sources referred to in this work, primary sources are frequently sketchy and ill-defined. The fact remains here, though, that whether or not the women of Dartford Priory wanted and requested to be reinstated or not, they ultimately were. Whether through their own initiative or through the request of the Crown – again, given that this near-London community of ex-religious women, once one of the most renowned convents in the country, were living altogether at a time of renewed monastic intentions, this appears to be perfectly plausible – Dartford Priory was re-established under the monastic revitalisation of Mary I and Cardinal Pole. The idea of a petition from Cressener and her sisters, however, remains a prominent and not unreasonable one, when viewed in light of the re-foundations and institutional continuations happening at the same time.

Such a petition was not without any precedent. Around what must have been about the end of the 1550s, four monks, now members of the reformed monastery at Westminster, submitted a request for a reinstatement of their original house at Glastonbury:

‘So it may please your good Lordship again, for the honour of both, both of God and their Majesties… concerning the Erection of the late Monastery of Glassenbury… We ask nothing in Gift to the Foundation, but only the House and Scite, the residue for the accustomed rent; So that with out Labour and Husbandary, we may live here a few of us in our Religious Habits, till the Charity of good People may suffice a greater number: and the Country there being so affected to our Religion, we believe we should find more help amongst them, towards the Reparations and Furniture of the same; whereby we would happily prevent the ruin of much, and repair no little part of the whole, to God’s Honour…’[[504]](#footnote-504)

Although this is, of course, a male house, with men writing already from a platform of re-enclosure, the themes of spiritual and moral regeneration (the letter goes on to detail their martyrs from the Dissolution years as further justification) in a communal setting are clear. Wizeman additionally points to popular support on the ground from the religious, asserting how male monastics returned from exile in this period and who more or less ‘established themselves.’[[505]](#footnote-505) He also points to developments being made in semi-(male)monastic communities across the country – ‘progress appears to have been made on resurrecting the Observant friary in Southampton, the Benedictine abbeys of Glastonbury and St Albans, and there seemed to be a number of Benedictine and Cistercian ‘communities in embryo’ in the North.’[[506]](#footnote-506) Wizeman does not elaborate on which ‘communities in embryo’ to which he is referring, but it could certainly be the case that communal groups like those of the four Cistercian women of Kirklees constitute the term.

The restitution of Syon Abbey as a community brought them home from Termonde. Sources for this period are thinner than usual for the abbey, meaning that generally it is less addressed in scholarship. The fact, however, that the abbey was seen to be of such importance, due, presumably, to both its pre-Dissolution spiritual renown and its contemporary togetherness, explains much about the Marian reinstatement’s policy and process. The geographical links that Syon had once enjoyed with the capital, and the Crown, mirror the closeness of the male monasteries (and the female Dominicans) that were refounded; the Observant Franciscan Friars returned to Greenwich, the Dominicans were reinstated at Smithfield, Carthusians from Sheen went back to their original locality and the Benedictine abbey of Westminster was re-established.[[507]](#footnote-507) The reconstructions of these houses appears to be something of an intended monastic nucleus for the country; it is unsurprising that the Marian regime, in such a short time frame and so early on in what was presumably intended to be a much longer rule, wished to develop monasticism where they had proximate control.

It might not be too much to state, either, that the spiritual benefits the Crown may have garnered through these local houses was a consideration; in establishing both close and, importantly, spiritually robust relationships before the Dissolution, these places ‘of prayer and intercession, mortification, charity and hospitality’ might have held, and been be seen to hold, spiritually beneficial connections. Pole encapsulates this when he glorified those ‘religiouse men [sadly, no mention of women] out of those religiouse howses that were moste refourmede, suche as were moste notable for theyr virtue and religion: as out of the Charterhowses, owte of Syon, and the fryars Observantes, and of St Francys…’ alongside the Catholic martyrs of the Edwardian and earlier reigns.[[508]](#footnote-508) Furthermore, Syon, as suggested elsewhere in this work, enjoyed a close relationship with a young Princess Mary, and particularly with her mother, as the Abbey famously supported Catherine of Aragon in the political skirmishes of ‘the King’s Great Matter’ nearly thirty years previously. In inferring to those who had been martyred during Henry’s reign, Cardinal Pole reaffirms this more personal connection.[[509]](#footnote-509)

It should be stated that though these houses were reinstated, there remains no legal or institutional evidence to suggest it was part of a grander plan to reverse the Dissolution of the monasteries. Yet that is not to say that such sentiments were wholly beyond the thinking of Mary I’s advisors; Wizeman has further suggested that Pole’s personal enthusiasm for monasticism generally was, if not at the heart of Marian Church reform, at least present and deemed important. Pointing to his sermon of 1557, ‘Pole praised the monastic life and remarked that he would have encouraged the people to restore more communities, if the parishes were not in such great need.’[[510]](#footnote-510) In a letter to Rome as early as 1555, Pole similarly asserts the importance of refoundations (seemingly stressing the exalted importance, too, of the mendicant orders, although the number of houses appears to have been at best optimistic):

‘Means have always been found to restore at once twelve convents of religious, three of the mendicants of St Francis and of St Dominic, the others of other orders. The greatest difficulty will be to find good subjects, though there is no lack of members of these fraternities who evince a desire to return to live in their old institutions… Thus with God’s grace and the piety of the king and queen the spoils and ruins of the past (which are countless) will little by little be restored.’[[511]](#footnote-511)

The works of Catholic sympathising writers, however, still drew attention to the enclosed life, and particularly to women within it; Cuthbert Tunstall, in *Certaine Godly and Devout Prayers*, exalting so many aspects of traditional devotion, made particular reference to monastic life:

‘O most mekest trinitie, fortifye the religious, that the maye despise worldly things, observe they lawe, and kepe theyr vowes, made and promised unto the. O most mercifull Trinitie, graunt unto al virgins uncorrupt chastity… grace to conteine, and to lyve conty.’[[512]](#footnote-512)

This work, written in the 1530s, another moment of extreme religious and political upheaval particularly affecting monastic groups, was translated by Thomas Paynell in 1558; this suggests not only a resuming of Catholic defence and exaltation of traditional faith, but, in particular, the necessity of the doing so at a time of reinstatement and transition.

Providing something of a very small counter to general scholarship of the period too, is the fact that neither Dartford nor Syon failed to gain new recruits in their short reinstated lives. As Anstruther recorded, Dartford Priory lost members in the years between and just after the reinstatement, but gained a new postulant before it moved abroad, as recorded in 1560.[[513]](#footnote-513) This remains, of course, only a small uptake – there is no evidence to suggest a specific longing and outpouring of a need for monastic vocation at the end of the 1550s. New generations of women were not flocking in great numbers to the reinstated Dartford Priory and Syon Abbey, not suggesting a hitherto frustrated need for religious life. Historians have, as previously mentioned, seen this as another dimension to the ‘inept, reactionary and flawed’ policies of the Marian church.[[514]](#footnote-514)

The fact, however, that the houses were only restored for less than two years might suggest a more common sense, practical reason than simply a lack of vocation, especially given that hundreds of women left England by the end of the century to join Continental convents. Both Dartford and Syon, despite how well remembered they were, had, in 1559, only a handful of sisters, had only just moved back into communal lodgings, and were presumably too busy restabilising themselves in the local communities from which they had been absent for such a long time. The fact that monasticism had been cleared from the religious and political landscape of England for twenty years might still have made the religious life, to young women without any prior memory of the reputations of these particular houses, nor monasticism generally, something of an unattractive option. Whether or not the revival of monasticism would have inspired a Counter Reformation in England under Mary (or indeed, vice versa), the fact remains that without the Catholic monarch, monasticism was once again dissolved under the ascension of a new Protestant queen. While neither house actively defied their fate, the fact that neither submitted to their governmental visitors, or signed the Oath of Elizabethan Supremacy, marks communal, passive resistance, and marks their strength of community feeling as a monastic group, however small and fragile these connections might have been.[[515]](#footnote-515)

In May 1559, the women of Dartford Priory and Syon Abbey left England for France, in a boat provided by King Philip of Spain, husband to the late queen. The relevant but oblique connections between the two, and exactly what this represents, cannot be ignored when interpreting their communities. The familial relationships between the two houses, while not present at this second dissolution, fosters an interconnection of heritage and memory. This voyage was undertaken under the guidance of Friar Richard Hargrave, an authoritative Dominican and successor of William Peryn, the author of a work dedicated to a Syon sister, uniting these houses differing in order and in size. The connections outlined in the introduction to this section, regarding the wills that leave money to both Dartford and Syon nuns in this period, furthers an understanding of women inherently connected through a shared spirituality. Also addressed above are the cross-overs in the religious literature that both groups of women took abroad, reaffirming the textual communities of devotion that bound them together. The symbolism of them being literally ‘in the same boat’ is nearly impossible to ignore; as these last bastions of the strength and spiritual integrity of medieval female monasticism left England, these communities established over the last century, entered another phase of reinvented meanings and reformed community ideals.

*The Triumphs and Trials of Exile: A Tale of Two Convents*

In 1578, a small group of some of the youngest nuns at Syon Abbey’s Continental convent returned to England, following their beleaguered battle for settlement and peace in areas frequently taken over by Calvinists.[[516]](#footnote-516) One of these young women was Elizabeth Sanders, who, in writing to Marian adviser Sir Francis Englefield upon her return to her sisters in the Low Countries in 1587, provided one of the most revealing sources of any sixteenth-century English female religious. The letters, printed in the Bridgettine magazine *Poor Souls Friend* in 1966, detailed Sanders’ and her small band of sisters’ movement around the recusant networks of 1570s and 80s southern England, as they attempt to escape discovery, imprisonment and persecution from the Elizabethan authorities (frequently unsuccessfully). Within them, Elizabeth Sanders offered, and continues to offer, a crucial glimpse into the communal world of young women religious; far from their Tridentine enclosure ideals, her words reveal ‘a woman whose religion and community – though at some distance – give her a strong sense of her own identity.’[[517]](#footnote-517)

This aspect of personal and community is present throughout, and provides something of the defining narrative of the connective-ness for her experiences. Her lively, almost mischievous narrative is by turns extraordinary and dangerous; faced with interrogation from the Elizabethan authorities, Sanders frequently reacts quickly, assertively and with gusto. On her first night in England, the constable in whose house they were staying in ‘examyned us what we were… to wch questyons, we smyled, gyving no word att all and so we passyd from thence w[i]t[h] out more ado.’[[518]](#footnote-518) When she was brought before a Justice of the Peace in Hampshire after staying with her [biological] sister, when he ‘examyned me and asked for my Pryst, for my Albes and vestments wherewt he had sayd masse… I answeryd, that I knew of no pryst, albe or vestment, and that the chalice and booke was myne owne, for I brought ytt over w[i]t[h] me.’[[519]](#footnote-519) It is certainly possible, as Ann Hutchinson has pointed out, to detect a cheeky faux-defiance in her answers, particularly given the dangerousness of her situation; on the brink of being sent to prison in front of the Justice, she ‘desyred him to showe me some favour, I was but a poore woman, I knew of no such matters as they examined me of, and I besowght hym, that I might returne until my brothers howse agyne…’, alerting the reader to the ironic use of her ‘weak’ gender in a submissive, yet obviously subverted, form.[[520]](#footnote-520)

While these insights into the courageous and spirited character of Sanders is fascinating, it is her inferences to her community understandings that reveal the clearest connections present in this exiled Bridgettine community. Her commitment to her sisters, even though dispersed in a country that fears and imprisons them, is demonstrably strong. This exchange demonstrates something fundamental about what was assumed to form her community at the time; the Justice assumes their community to be headed by (male) Catholic authority and formed through sacramental trappings. There is a certain irony in her being asked such questions about her alms and vestments; the poverty and uncertainty faced by these English nuns in the decades after the Dissolution meant that the spiritual miscellany their community, and communities like them, had been so closely based around had gone, led to the reconfiguring of a community culture.

The community that now remained, that had endured, was based around a feeling, as Highley stated, of outsider identity, formed through the personal friendships of commonality with her sisters. Sanders describes the death of Sister Anne Stapleton as something she experienced through a deeply personal relationship (‘[she] was very syck, and w[i]t[h] her I remayned all the tyme of her sykness… until St Thomas day at w[hi]ch tyme I was sent away fro[m] her… much against myne owne mynde, for I would not have left her by any meanes in that case fearing greatly her death w[hi]ch shortly after ensuyd…’). This sentiment was not present in her somewhat drier-eyed references to her biological brother and sister.[[521]](#footnote-521) In a later letter, on her release from another jail spell, ‘almost at the same time and through the same Providence of God several other nuns of our community, who had been scattered about in different English prisons arrived here, and their arrival increased our gladness and consolation.’

It was Saunders’ staunch role within her devotional community, however, that truly informed her identity and connections to her Catholic sisters, and the broader Catholic community through exile, as Highley has stated.[[522]](#footnote-522) She repeatedly refused to go to Protestant church, to hear even a single service.[[523]](#footnote-523) During her twenty three week stint at Brydwell Castle, a prison summed up by Sanders as ‘a place indeed for Roogs’, she recounts how the authorities, ‘usyng many pswatyons to make me yeald,’ promised her ‘freedome and liberty yf I would conform my self to them’, without success.[[524]](#footnote-524) Through Sanders, we are able to glimpse an insight into the active women who would, later in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, for Walker, ‘enjoy a less dangerous, albeit just as despised, relationship with the new regime.’[[525]](#footnote-525)

Recounting the hardships of imprisonment, Sanders’ words imply a deep spiritual understanding of what she and her fellow Bridgettine sisters were enduring. Narrating her numerous releases and further detentions, including how her actions involved the imprisonment of a relative, she reflects on how she came to certain conclusions:

‘Thereupon it seemed to me that it were not the will of God that I should be at liberty, since he so often sent me back to prison… Yet as I had no remourse of conscience, and I only desired my liberty for his greater glory and by lawful means, I took courage and though it grieved me to have been the cause of the annoyance and imprisonment of my relative, yet… she took it in good part, and was prepared to suffer even greater things for the glory of God…’[[526]](#footnote-526)

Within the text, Sanders strongly implies a connection between the personal sufferings of herself and her fellow Catholic women as religious trials, viewing these difficulties in a spiritually compassionate sense.

This letter, and these conclusions, were written on the community’s return to Rouen, almost a decade after they initially left. The hindsight present in making these inferences may well have influenced the way in which she formulated these ideas; by the late 1580s, the English Catholic community abroad, and particularly the former nuns of Syon Abbey, was as under threat as ever on the continent, with England showing no sign of overthrowing Protestantism and returning to the ‘true faith.’ In a ‘petition for the aid from the religious of the Order of St Bridget, formally of Sion in England’, written sometime between the early 1580s-mid 1590s, the Syon brothers draw attention to their sufferings for charitable gains back home. Describing how ‘notw[ith] standynge through feares, daunger and manifold injuryes brought upon them by ye heretykes,’ they had to depart various convents, where ‘they lyve in great necessytye and poverty, w[hi]ch invetibly commeth upon them dayly both by the great dearth and misery of the tyme, as also through the persecution of certeyne of their friends and best benefactors.’[[527]](#footnote-527) Just as Sanders wrote to Englefield on his request to ‘learn about the conditions [in England], and more importantly, to discover the names and whereabouts of those who had supported and sheltered her’, this petition reveals the situation on the former abbey’s inhabitants to those in England, offering something of a comparison of suffering, a disparate and separated microcosm of Catholic difficulties under Protestant yoke.[[528]](#footnote-528) In this context, the understanding to which Sanders comes in her letter, of the Bridgettine sufferings as a religious experience, mirrors and is mirrored in the experiences of her fellow Catholic English community.

*The Life and Good End of Sister Marie*, the biography that began this work, furthers the detailed narrative of female monastic exile experience. Despite being ‘Raysed upp of God in the midst of a stiffnecked nation to the confusion and condempnacion of the so ungodly’ Mary Champney left England in the later sixteenth century to join religious houses on the continent, all with English members, or, as in Syon’s case, with heavily English roots (suggesting a gendered discrepancy to Knowles’ claim that ‘there is little evidence that the ex-religious in any number sought to follow their vocation in exile.’[[529]](#footnote-529)).[[530]](#footnote-530) The anonymous author of the *Life* addresses, as Sanders did, the death of Anne Stapleton, suggesting again that the death of this single woman, so far from her sisters, affected the entire community, yet also symbolised something pivotal in the traumatised English Catholic community: ‘[she] in works of obedience and all other payntes of virtue was a gracious virgin, but fower years professed. Dying also in Englande, verie blessedlie, as a witness for Godes people against the wicked, after manye tempests of tribulacion in exile susteyned.’[[531]](#footnote-531)

The pains endured similarly mirror the injuries narrated within the Petition: ‘upon the furie of the holye gospelles invading, they [stripped] them starke naked, leading them up and downe so perforce in their camps.’[[532]](#footnote-532) The description of the ‘paynted’ Princess of Orange (‘I detest her as accused of God for slander which she had brought to religion. ‘Such another nunne’ quoth shee, ‘belike as Luther was a friar!’) furthers the idea of these exiled nuns as connected to their English Catholic community, in linguistically asserting a common enemy. The gendered dynamic to the criticism, too, subverts the Protestant propaganda insisted that nuns were promiscuous, morally negligent and altogether ‘other-ly’ (as demonstrated most fully in *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon in Portugal* in 1622, this criticism took on a double pronged attack through the fear of their faith and their national home) by recreating the hated Princess in this image.[[533]](#footnote-533) It does not seem too much to see a mirroring link to these Bridgettines’ treatment of another Protestant English queen decades before; the fact that the Syon nuns display the same hatred to the Princess of Orange as they did in the early 1530s to Anne Boleyn is unsurprising, but it marks a continuation of their political engagement.

What marks out Sanders’ letters most obviously from the *Life* is the private nature of the former, and the very public purpose of the latter. While Elizabeth Sanders came to the understanding that the trials undergone by her and her sisters were God-sent as a test of communal faith, and sees herself as part of this dispersed but interconnected Catholic community, the anonymous author of the biography of Mary Champney attempts to provide those in England with the spiritual inspiration to continue in their own difficulties. While the descriptions of the trials endured by the Elizabethan government reinforce Sanders’ experience (though without her perhaps slightly cheeky response), the *Life* projects them as a spiritual inspiration for use within their broader devotional community; describing a collection of Syon nuns who returned to England, the anonymous author portrays them as ‘in such a trembling feare of some like barbarous partes perhapps to be offered as [wretchedlie] to them’, before a traumatic meeting with the English army, when Mary barely escapes rape at the hands of a soldier. [[534]](#footnote-534) ‘For eyther in faythe’, Mary is quoted as saying towards the end of her biography, ‘or in hope, or in fasting, or in prayer, or in alms, or in teare, we may be illuded… But the perfecte lover of God and of his neighboure shalbe sure… to be saved,’ addressing both what Hutchinson stated was its primary intention, ‘to strengthen the faith of English Catholics who lived in fear at this time and provide them with an inspiring role model’, as well as nurturing the idea of an intensified community feeling.[[535]](#footnote-535)

Dartford Priory was not able to foster such an important role in the English Catholic community in exile, for what appears to be the most practical of reasons. Writing to their old king and seemingly, something of a protector, Philip II of Spain, within a year of their leaving England, Elizabeth Cressener makes a plea for the payment of pensions he appears to have promised them. The sums are not vast, with Cressener reminding the king of a vow to pay them each an annual twenty four gulden for their keep, and eight more for their clothes.[[536]](#footnote-536) Anstruther, in paraphrasing the letter, describes how, although it has been written into French, Cressener also includes a list of sisters, naming only half a dozen nuns.[[537]](#footnote-537) All but one, a Joan Curtis who presumably was Dartford’s recruit during their Marian reinstatement, were members of the original convent dissolved over twenty years before.

While the English Catholic community connections are as obliquely strong as a decade earlier (the list includes Elizabeth White, the half-sister of one-time darling of Tudor society, John Fisher, martyred in 1535 for his commitment to the old faith and the writer of A Spiritual Consolation, a work dedicated to White, and Elizabeth Exmew, one of the two ex-nuns at Walsingham and the sister of fellow martyr William, a monk at Charterhouse), the numbers are still tiny, and the poverty clearly overwhelming. Yet Cressener did not stop in her fight to maintain Dartford’s place within this spiritual community; in writing to the new pope Pius V, she describes the inducements and persecutions that her nuns received back in England, before the Elizabethan dissolution (Anstruther paraphrases ‘how the English heretics, by fair words first and then threats, endeavoured to induce them to throw off their habit and religious life and conform to the new heresy’).[[538]](#footnote-538) Like the letters of Elizabeth Sanders, Cressener’s inference places her and her convent within the sufferings of the Catholic community, reinforcing connections from across vast distances and serving to continue the community ties their convent had spent centuries forming and maintaining..

In May the same year, Cressener and her community are referenced in the notes of the Dominican Master General, granting that they may be incorporated into the provinces of either Lower Germany or France, ‘wherever they find benevolent nuns of the order to take them in.’[[539]](#footnote-539) This is, presumably, due to the tiny size and economic hardship the women faced, but when Cressener appealed to the pope yet again in 1560, it appears she was hopeful of not only a return to England, but with a strong band of Dominican novices too. Should the errors committed in England cease, she asked the pope for a license to allow them to take home the new recruits, and set up their community again with them.[[540]](#footnote-540) Paul Lee has suggested that Elizabeth Cressener indicated that ‘the English nuns, under her guidance, had no intention of being absorbed into another province, but of maintaining her identity as nuns of the English female province in exile.’[[541]](#footnote-541) It certainly held precedence for the female Dominicans; as stated earlier, Prioress Cressener Senior, thirty years before and once again threatened with the enjoining of their community with other women religious, wrote to Thomas Cromwell pleading that her convent escape being combined with women of a different Order. It appears that the strength of Dartford’s communal bonds, both national and spiritual, remained strong into their exile.

The later additions by the Master General regarding Dartford, however, suggest that these practical difficulties overpowered any notion of remaining a united, communal unit. Following the death of Richard Hargrave in 1567, there remained ‘no father of the order who speaks their language’, and the duties of sacrament administering was passed to the Dean of Bristol, a fellow exile, but only seven years later, ‘the prioress and mothers of Dermonde are ordered to receive charitably into their monastery the three surviving nuns out of England, and the latter are to betake themselves thither.’[[542]](#footnote-542) It seems a sad end for a convent of such strong communal feeling throughout its lifetime, and despite the struggles of its members to remain autonomous and together despite so many difficulties and circumstances.

Syon Abbey received, as detailed in *The Life and Good End of Sister Marie*, young novices from England, which sustained their convent and ultimately helped it to grow into a microcosm of English Catholic fervour well into the seventeenth century; the English identity held by these Bridgettine nuns is clear not only from their physical and sacramental differentiation from Flemish nuns, but also in their nineteenth-century return to Britain after nearly three hundred years of exile and European wandering.[[543]](#footnote-543) It is not clear from the sources why the Dominican women of Dartford failed to attract the same level of recruits, but it is potentially due to a number of common sense factors. As a young woman with a vocation, or as parents wishing to further enhance their family’s relationship within the Catholic community at a time of Protestant rule, not only might a convent renowned for resistance to Henrician reform and for particularly stringent spirituality look attractive, but its relative wealth might make it a more attractive proposition. Dartford, by contrast, was not only poorly endowed on entering exile, but the women within it were both relatively elderly and extremely small in number.

By the 1590s, with the death of the last Dartford Dominican nuns, the Bridgettines of Syon were the only convent that had started life in England to survive on the continent. Further to this, too, is the development of English-led convent foundations abroad; with Tridentine enclosure and reputations completely without the visitation blemishes of the Dissolution, the Poor Clares and the female Augustinians at Louvain, as well as those in France and Belgium provided an attractive and viable option. Claire Walker states that by the end of the seventeenth century, there were twenty-two English convents ‘ that had survived the vicissitudes of exile and poverty’ described in works about the Bridgettines.[[544]](#footnote-544) The Syon sisters gained nine new English members in the 1560s and continued to attract women like Mary Champney; ‘Founded, or in the case of Bridgettines exiled, with the express intention of returning to England once Catholicism was tolerated in their homeland, the cloisters wanted women who understood their experience as members of a minority faith in a Protestant country to become their monastic sisters.’[[545]](#footnote-545) This ideological boundary is demonstrated in Champney’s biography, clearly attesting to the fact that not only did convents like the English Bridgettines only require English women, but that English women felt a special affinity with these home-nation-only houses.

Through exile, the women of Dartford Priory and Syon Abbey saw themselves and their immediate communities as part of a much wider community of Englishness and devotion; physically parted, their relationships to each other, their spirituality and their surroundings were imbued with a vocation based both on shared memory, and further back, shared history. Syon became a microcosm of English resistant devotional ideals, inspiring those left behind and hoping to inspire not only change but renewed faith by the very trials they were facing. Dartford, although its fortunes differ, maintained the strength of communal links forged through its spiritual identity. It still held an oblique place in the memories of those members of their troubled devotional community back home in England.

*Conclusions*

Communities of women religious dispersed at the Dissolution. They struggled to maintain their connections to each other through poverty. They had reinstatements thwarted after only months of institutional reunion. They were without the sacramental and legal means of forming their communities. These women were not able to gain solid enough foundations during this period to gain new recruits, leaving their re-enclosed communities, for the most part, approaching old age, and in a vulnerable position. These women had to leave their homeland, the devotional communities that had held them for centuries, of which they were, and felt they were, a huge, important member. But these communities did not die. Despite historiography that suggested disappearance and re-emergence, or quiet, individual retirements, English women religious maintained their community links throughout every obstacle, maintaining and cultivating a sense of religious life without any of the institutional or legal justification that they had held for so long.

Communities in the immediate aftermath of the Dissolution can be witnessed through wills and shared rents, through the shared lives of ex-nuns as ‘religious communities in embryo.’ Remaining in contact and through physical proximity, the nuns of the Yorkshire houses remained embedded into their landscape and localities, inkeeping with their Cistercian forebears’ centuries before. The will bequests and naming within these bequeaths affirm a strong, unflinching continuation of both their general faith and their specific Cistercian, enclosed spirituality; focusing on the Virgin Mary, for example, betrays a continuation and reverence to a figure so central in their ‘previous’ religious and practical lives.

Rejecting the domesticity of returning home to their families and embracing the autonomy they held while enclosed, women religious maintained their independence before some achieved their longed-for reinstatement. The community spirit and togetherness was enough to sustain them for two decades before the Marian reign, as they fostered fragile new beginnings through either autonomous petitions or reputation-dependant invitations. When they were once again dissolved, the women of Dartford and Syon, implicitly connected through the devotional links of spiritual works, did not crumble, but quite the opposite; no longer content to maintain their communities in difficulty and limbo, their moves abroad signified a new move towards their role in English’s devotional community. They were all the more a vital member because of their distance, not in spite of it.

Whilst in exile, these English women religious were held as communities for emulation and inspiration. Written to show suffering in near-Biblical ways, these nuns continued vital roles within the English Catholic community, but also, through their sufferings and distance, felt a part of it. Through correspondence with royalty and the Pope, they attempted in many desperate ways to keep together the most basic of materials necessary for the survival of the communities, despite poverty, persecution and national displacement. It was their very suffering that, for Syon at least, presented them as an attractive option to young English women looking to fulfil their spiritual vocations. Their communities ended the sixteenth century in ways remarkably different from how they began it. It is, of course, true to state that only one of the communities, out of all three case studies, remained intact, but this is not to the detriment of the tenacity and resourcefulness of women religious who continued, maintained and furthered spiritual and physical togetherness with both each other and their wider communities at moments of unprecedented testing and without the cultural and legal instruments that formed and reformed their communities for centuries.

***Conclusion***

In 1622, Thomas Robinson wrote a pamphlet ‘exposé’ on the Bridgettines who once presided at Syon Abbey.[[546]](#footnote-546) Written for an English and Protestant audience, *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon in Portugal* played up to every one of the very worst of Catholic and particularly enclosed religious stereotypes. On entering the convent community under duress and having been kept there against his will, Robinson recounted the sinister and immoral aspects of the exclusive community:

[the Father’s] ‘subtill and wily fetches inticed [Robinson] to abide with him in the house, imploying [him] dayly in copying out certaine Treatises of Obedience, which hee had composed for the Nunnes. And after… hauing deprived [him] of meanes to depart from him, by taking away [his] apparel, and putting [him] into a disguised foolish habite (of which [he] was heartily ashamed) both hee and the Abbesse, with some others of the sisters (as they cal them) never ceased to urge [him] by deepe-dissembled intreaties and perswasions until [he] had given consent to become a holy Brother and Mass-priest in the house…’[[547]](#footnote-547)

Reiterating their proliferated image as untrustworthy, depraved and thoroughly ‘Otherly’, Robinson drew attention firmly not only to their wicked deeds but to the communal element that allowed such misbehaviour to fester and continue. Describing the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the enclosed’s subsequent exile as ‘the glorious light of the Gospell [that] began to bee more and more resplendent in the latter end of the Reigne of Henry the 8, then as well these Houses, as all other of the like superstition were… abolished… dismissed and [the inhabitants] sent home to their friends or else continuing more obstinately in their blinde zeal, exiled,’ Robinson reported that ‘the Papists… nay, some of the holiest of our unholy Sisters, have not doubted… to prophesie of another golden age, when they shall againe be installed in Syon.’[[548]](#footnote-548) The double-house nature of the Bridgettines and their sharing of enclosed space, ‘for all their outward shew of holinesse was nothing but dissimulation, hypocrisie and lustfull sacriledge… [with the Father] hath in his Cell, where he heareth their confession, a Grate… thorow which the Nunnes pase to his bed by night.’[[549]](#footnote-549) For Robinson, the convent space itself was not only a breeding ground for Catholic immorality, but the community itself and the communal feelings and understandings between the men and women of the convent was nothing short of dangerous.

For all the license Robinson appears to have taken – and as Caroline Bowden so well articulates, there appears to have been many reasons as to why this particular version of events in this Bridgettine house is untrustworthy, not least of which the timing, corresponding so neatly with ‘a burst of extremist Protestant polemic’ in England – he identifies the importance, the strength, and the make-up of female monastic community. Referencing the shared habit and religious dress, Robinson addressed the visual differentiation of nuns from their peers; the visual element of their community informed their communal feelings from their convent conception, but more importantly, it reformed and perpetuated the language of community within the community space. Robinson’s emphasis on the nuns reading salacious books neatly corresponds to their communal appreciation of and dependence on the textual material that formed and informed their community both inside the cloister and communal links with those outside. Despite having left England for the second time almost half a century ago, the women who had once belonged to Syon Abbey remained a prominent part of their English devotional community; further to Robinson’s suggestion, the consistent influx of English women to the convent and their returning to their home country more than two centuries later suggest a strength of this bonded role within their community that neither time nor distance could break. In reporting – however accurately or otherwise – on the inner workings of an English nunnery, Robinson addressed and subverted the very nature and substance of what made and remade their community.

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The community of women religious in the late medieval period was not simply defined or made by the convent walls that enclosed them. Community was created, recreated and reformed consistently over the course of the convent life, with the inhabitants knowing and actively engaging in the materials that supported and informed their convent. It was through texts and visual culture that this community was formed and able to change alongside the demands of the outside world. Textual material gave its female readers a shared understanding of their faith, a deeper understanding of their order-ed identity and a mutual understanding of themselves in relation to those who live outside the cloister. The pastoral care aspects of their vocations are both instilled and encouraged by their reading, providing a communal purpose and encouraging them to fulfil one outside their convent walls. The similarities between the emphases within devotional material of different case studies suggest a shared female understanding of faith, creating and cementing a community of female-centric and female-incorporated spirituality. Texts defined, established and formed the continuation of the community’s purpose of devotional and practicality.

Visual culture similarly informed and formed the community. The visual material that surrounded the nuns on a day-to-day basis informed how they understood their order-ed and their enclosed identity, providing them with effective piety that went beyond the more traditional devotionally-inspirational texts. Such images were not simply decorative and passive, but actively reiterated the communal bonds between nuns by enforcing and reinforcing the spiritual boundaries and connections between them. Symbolic visual culture, found within the conscious and unconscious elements of convent life, provided a language of connection that offered interpretation of their community boundaries. The imagery found within secular gifts and outward-facing material culture often mirrors these symbolic constructions, whilst redefining the practical connections with the outside community. Visual and textual culture formed and informed the structure of convent life, the internal perceptions of their faith and the boundaries that both connected and distinguished them with the secular world. The communities of women religious were built and rebuilt through these intrinsic aspects in a way that was not static, but ever evolving and adapting to the challenges and changes of the exterior world.

While the sources for both of these aspects of community are relatively thin, through the comparative aspect of English case-studies and through comparisons with German convents with which they share much in common, textual and visual culture can be assessed as a determining factor in the creation and recreation of female religious communities. Diaries and letters from German nuns suggest a greater deal of autonomy in choosing these textual and visual aspects, but the similarities in imagery and reading sources suggest the feelings elicited and the meanings derived correspond closely enough to form compelling comparisons. The understanding of the convent community not as a static entity or embodiment but a changing, malleable-from-the-inside state often appears a more forceful argument through the evidence of autonomous behaviour of German abbesses, but this corresponds to their advanced age, their higher degree of wealth and, subsequently, their greater establishment in their wider communities in comparison with their English counterparts. It remains, then, logical to assume that given shared circumstances, parallels can be drawn between actions and reactions of communities facing change and difficulty.

The adapting nature of the community is never clearer than within the difficulties brought by the Dissolution of the monasteries. From the perspective of outsiders, the community was not simply defined by the house walls. Rather, their understanding of the community was inherently closer to how it was seen by the female inhabitants themselves. The changing, internally reforming and consistently evolving community understandings inform the negotiations that underpin Dissolution practices; for men (and our evidence suggests that all who were involved in these negotiations over land and material with the Crown were men) with links to the religious communities through marriage and generational patronage, the convents and priories were more than the bricks and lead of female religious homes. As demonstrated in and through their letters and requests, female religious communities and the physical spaces that they inhabited were something not only to be invested in post-Dissolution, but were something that they *were* invested in quite beforehand.

This textual dimension of application and request is furthered in the textual negotiations undertaken by the women of the convents; correspondences with outsiders further the influence texts had on creating and forming the community. The writings of Elizabeth Cressener Senior in attempting to define her Dominican house against women of other orders joining, unbalancing and disrupting the close order-ed identity of Dartford, for example, reflects community defined through textual construction as much as through the words it uses. German nuns again offer a close and clear comparative dimension; their responses to the engulfing Reformation and menacing Peasant’s Revolt offer an emotive response to what was happening around them, creating, in the reading of the text, a shared, collective memory of their traumatic experience and the identity formation built upon it.

For events around women like Elizabeth Barton or the Yorkshire Cistercians, the lack of autonomous textual evidence is, as has been argued, no less a reflection of the textual connections that form and inform communities than the written material surrounding other convents. The textual links of Elizabeth Barton, for instance, and the role she played in a devotional community in the action of resisting Henry VIII’s remarriage, have been purposefully obscured, alerting the historian to the fact of panic on the side of the authorities not simply because of what the texts said, but what implications they might have in the longer term.

The subsequent survival and continuation of these communities is a result of the changing, malleable, pre-Reform and pre-Dissolution nature of the outward-facing communities of women religious. Without the institutional means of defining themselves within society or the nation, and without the sacramental means of establishing their devotional communities to each other and the world around them, community continued through the women reforming themselves; the institutional and the sacramental were two of the ways in which community had been formed, and without them, the textual, material and devotional inspired just as forceful a communal spirit (if not more so, in the cases of Dartford and Syon, who made the decisive breaks of entering exile). The communities of these women in exile, furthermore, continued to be created through imagery and around texts as much as they had ever been, but their exiled state fostered differentiation from their foreign contemporaries and further enforced togetherness.

The materiality of the break in convents provides the only real definitive break with the communities themselves; communities remaining might be smaller, but there is evidence of enough community maintenance to suggest continuation and formation through ways that were not authoritatively delivered, but rather based on the relationships between the women themselves. It was this relationship, based on a shared visual language and on shared, deeply-felt devotional understandings which inspired their autonomy in preserving their communities; these were the hallmarks of the community which they were, and had, striven to preserve.

In light of this, then, the historiographical approaches of institutional narratives of the Dissolution of the monasteries with regards to female religious is insufficient. For women that leave so little in the way of formal, legal or in most cases ‘recognisable’ source material, to impose an investigative method upon what they do leave behind will always be inadequate; as James Clark asserted, when studying the religious orders in pre-Reformation England, ‘In spite of its formidable reputation, the Court of Augmentations failed to leave the sort of paper trail that might have been expected.’[[550]](#footnote-550) Quite apart from the much-challenged Whiggish view of the English Reformation and the closure (and the years leading up to the closure) of the monasteries, the way in which Revisionists have approached them has either ignored them altogether or been much indebted to the institutional source frameworks; material that is not able to articulate the experiences of women religious is used, thus dividing scholarship further.

When scholars have approached the experiences of monastics facing Dissolution through limited source material, both gendered bias and isolationist frameworks of study have been employed. While it is true that studies of women religious in this disjointed period (see below) have undergone huge, incomparable strides in the past thirty years through prosopographical studies and through using literary sources (many of which this study owes a huge debt to), it needs to be stressed that the boundaries of study, when approached in these ways, will not produce a representational hypothesis of the experience of women religious. Periodisation of the medieval and early modern periods, furthermore, offers a stumbling block in terms of approaching women religious up to and in the sixteenth century, with few historians tackling the disjointed and dispersed nature of source material through the Dissolution process or the more unconscious but very definite ideological boundaries of pre- and post-1530s.

This thesis has attempted to make a contribution to solving some of these difficulties. Primarily this has been endeavoured through the examination of a wide and varied range of source material, much of which has hardly ever been brought together before in a representational study. Though the material for all the case studies is at best piecemeal and at worst supremely fragmented and disconnected, the sources in comparison offer striking similarities that allow for conclusions to be drawn of a representative nature. Material like the disjointed but fascinating surviving visual culture has been assessed alongside the more traditional textual, cultural and legal evidence, presenting a new methodological framework of cross-order and cross-region comparison for a more representative view of the experiences of women religious of and in their communities.

The inclusion of visual culture in particular offers an innovative way of looking at the remaining evidence; by drawing parallels between the admittedly sketchy, but nevertheless important remaining sources, visual culture informs this emerging field of study (at least within English medieval and early modern religious historiography). The inclusion of a German comparative dimension serves not simply to compensate for the ravages of the Dissolution on English records and materials, but to further this comparative dimension of inquiry; by drawing parallels between women undergoing similar, well-recorded trials in communities, this study’s emphasis on their English counterparts is informed by this affinity and conclusions can be drawn that assert more clearly their shared communal experience. By assessing different houses and orders of women religious, furthermore, this study offers a more illustrative picture of the differences across regions, economic situations and across religious boundaries; by bringing together three different case-studies, reflective of three generations of monasticism, different lengths of time during which the convent had been established and of broadly different reputations and services, this study’s focus on their similarities has established the fundamental parts of community formation and reformation, aspects that were typical as well as atypical.

This study further challenges the conventions of the Whiggish/Revisionist historiographical conventions by providing a community-centric study, rather than a focus on an external-in or top-down investigation. The questions asked of community in terms of its construction, its creation by those in and around it, and the memory and articulation of it, all provide a different and challenging narrative to previous focuses. Instead of viewing the English Reformation and the Dissolution as a process of either popular feelings or as institutionally-based, the centring of this project within community allows for an understanding of female monastic autonomy, of engagement between regions and groups, and of a longer-term perception of late medieval and early modern religious life. Finally, this thesis counters the periodising break of late medieval and early modern scholarship. By interpreting communities, groups that had been together in forms changing and refiguring for centuries before the Dissolution and that remained in embryo and through changing forms afterwards, boundaries that otherwise appear severe and historiographically impenetrable have been breached.

There are, of course, limitations to this form of investigation. Because of the comparative dimension of this work, it was impossible through time constraints and word-limits to consider and look in-depth at every single source available for every case-study. The literature and books once belonging to Syon Abbey, for instance, have only been looked at briefly and in cross-section form; it would take a work this long again to address each piece, and scholars (Grisé, Bell, and Gillespie, to name but a handful, referenced throughout this work and to whom this study owes an enormous debt) have already addressed with comprehension the libraries and literary outputs of Syon Abbey to an extent that would make any more attention focused on them by this study fairly redundant. The sources that this work has examined have been chosen for their representative quality, and though material does exist that this study has not consulted fully, reading around these sources suggests convincingly that such sources were either not applicable to the research questions employed or similar material had been consulted in its place.

This leads to the other major limitation of the project; while the study has provided a representative understanding of the national experiences of women religious and their communities in late medieval and early modern England, in terms of emphasis, the comparative element is still weighted more to Syon Abbey than to the other case-studies. In some instances, this is unavoidable; though every effort has been made to engage fully with the sources and historiography of Dartford Priory and the Yorkshire Cistercians, and female monasticism more widely, the sheer amount of surviving material for the Bridgettine house and the historical facts of the strength of the Syon women into the seventeenth century, alongside the unquestionably wide-reaching and inter-disciplinary scholarship regarding the Abbey, means that a study of female monasticism in England at this time has to rely heavily on this subject. The German comparative aspect has informed the comparative attention on the experiences of nuns and their shaping and refashioning of communities, but Syon Abbey still stands out as the ‘success story’ of the ability to continue and reimagine their community long into the early modern period.

In terms of future work, however, the suggestions that might be taken from this study aim to redress this balance on both representative sources and the focus on Syon Abbey as nucleus of late medieval and early modern religious life. The scarce but important visual culture of English nuns, by far the most understudied and admittedly difficult to piece together and study, clearly provides difficulties in applying an appropriate methodology and in source collation. Yet as this study has demonstrated, bringing together material in a variety of innovative ways (addressing references through texts to material culture and understanding the visually-inspiring rhetoric in devotional works as well as focusing on the actual physical visual culture left behind by women religious in architecture, archaeological spaces, woodcuts and embroidery) reveals connections and definite themes between women religious that only addressing their textual and legal material does not. Using methods borrowed from prosopographical inquiries, this study has attempted to bring these sources together using a representational methodology, to draw parallels between case studies, if not absolute certain comparisons. It is this more ‘democratic’ approach – Syon Abbey is in much the same situation in terms of remaining visual culture as many of its contemporaries – that provides a new way of looking at the communities of women religious that might not be entirely systematic but is certainly a new approach to the study of female monasticism that provides greater scope for informed answers.

In addition to this, the comparative aspect with the visual culture of the nuns’ contemporaries in other European countries is an area ripe for historiographical expansion. As Jeffrey F. Hamburger has so comprehensively and clearly asserted, the visual culture of German nuns provides a great deal of material; while English nuns do not offer anywhere near the same level of material produced within convents themselves, elements of visual space and visual rhetoric could be compared within and between individual houses or orders. French and Italian nuns, furthermore, leave both the comparable textual material for this rhetoric imagery understandings and the physical spaces the ravages of the Dissolution and Reformation in England and Germany destroyed. While this presents difficulties in comparison of cases not directly applicable, it would suggest answers (or at least more detailed questions) about the sparse examples remaining in England and Germany; if the research questions were pointed to understanding the physicality of female monastic space, French and Italian case-studies might provide the evidence with which to discover their Protestant counterparts.

It is this negotiation of community and community space that remains the biggest unanswered question to emerge from the research of this project; while Roberta Gilchrist’s exceptional work on the Yorkshire Cistercians demonstrates the huge potential for a wider understanding of communal space for women religious, and what this explains about their communal lives and spirituality, the examining of the remains of Syon Abbey and Dartford Priory remain, to my knowledge, broadly untouched. Particularly interesting from a female monastic perspective, such studies (either archaeological or more interdisciplinary, based within visual culture and borrowing from prosopographical methodology) could reveal the connections of monastics in not only their physical space, but what this can suggest about their roles within local and devotional communities.

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This study began with the biography of Mary Champney, the anonymous work that aimed to inspire the communities of English Catholics in their faith and their resistance through the story of, quite literally, one of their own; a nun in one of the best-known of late medieval English convents, an ambassador for them abroad and a part of their devotional lives through her work and vocation. It seems appropriate to end here too; *The Life and Good End of Sister Marie* historically crystallises a moment of English female religious within their overlapping, concurrent and interconnected communities, whilst demonstrating the abilities with which such communities had been formed, restructured and developed across their lifetime.

The work of the biography itself, referencing not only Mary Champney but many of her fellow (very real) nuns, created a textual memory that defined the struggles and connections of their community to be referred to by their members. The intention of the author in writing it, further, created a communal bond with their broader devotional community, with the text creating a tangible and emotional link between the nation’s sufferings and their own. The references to the habit, the most traditional of visual culture relating to nuns, solidified their community as apart from the lay, as a rite of passage to be undergone in the creation and consistent reaffirmation of their communal bonds. The understandings of the English Catholic community at home in England, furthermore, reinforced the connections between the laity that had actively attempted to preserve some of the physical and spiritual remnants of female monasticism during the rupture of the Dissolution. The Bridgettines’ very existence in exile as a community of exclusively English nuns is demonstrative not only of the bonds of community between the women, but their long-held, nation-wide and inter-order abilities to consistently reconstruct what their community was, what it had been, and what it was to become.

The communities of women religious in late medieval and early modern England were created and recreated by the strength of their devotional impetus, the co-dependant relationships with those on the outside but above all, between themselves, in the most testing period of their history. This thesis has attempted to shed needed light onto these endeavours, struggles and triumphs.

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266. Gilchrist, ‘Blessed art thou’, p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
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268. Charles Zika, in his historiographical review article, summed up the way in which religious symbolism is adapted and transformative in devotional practice and understanding: ‘The success of particular representations, about peasant behaviour, religious devotion or the activities of witches for instance, depends on their capacity to be communicated by different media and to be integrated with different discourses… This cultural integration seems a fundamental step in the process of universalising meaning and subsequently of achieving broad social acceptance.’ Zika, ‘Writing the Visual’, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Test. Ebor., p. 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. *Ibid*., p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
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274. Silvia Evangelisti, ‘Monastic Poverty and Material Culture in Early Modern Italian Convents’ *The Historical Journal*47 (2004), p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. *Ibid*., p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
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278. Archdeacon of Richmond visiting Yorkshire convent of Nun Monkton, transcribed in John H. Tillotson, ‘Marrick Priory: A Nunnery in Late Medieval Yorkshire’ *Borthwick Papers* 75 (1990), p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
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281. W. Cunningham, *The Growth of English Industry and Commerce during the Early and Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1890), p. 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
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283. ‘The Groverste family were the principal inhabitants of Dartford, and the nuns were occasionally permitted to visit them; there was an oratory in their mansion, and a room hung with tapestry, said to be worked by those ladies,’ in Dunkin, *History and Antiquities*, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. M. D. Anderson suggests that the dating, in the absence of documentary evidence, must naturally come from analysing the style: ‘In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the sets were generally of simple forms with straight or convex sides, or simply curved… The fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century misericords are frequently polygonal in shape, with a point in the centre of the front’, in M. S. Anderson, *Misericords: Medieval Life in English Woodcarving* (Edinburgh, 1954), p. 8; The Swine misericords are not similarly shaped, but as Hardwick argues, the common themes within the imagery evident at Swine and across the country could point to the dissemination of images in engravings from the later fifteenth century, suggesting the carvers of these Yorkshire misericords could have been influenced by these later pictures; Hardwick, *English Medieval Misericords*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Description of Swine misericords in database of nation-wide misericords <http://www.misericords.co.uk/timeline.html> [last accessed 30th September 2015]. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. J. Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’ in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies; An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (New York, 2008), p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. *Ibid*., p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Christa Grossinger, *The World Upside-down: English Misericords* (London, 1997), p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
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290. Hardwick, *English Medieval Misericords*, p. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. For images, see this website, a database of thousands of surviving misericords in Britain and Ireland, with several comprehensive pictures <http://www.misericords.co.uk/swine.html> (last accessed 18th July 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
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295. VCH, Swine Priory [http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/yorks/vol3/pp178-182]. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
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297. Anderson, *Misericords*, pp. 24-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
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305. Grossinger, *The World Upside-Down*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
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319. O’ Sullivan, ‘Becoming ancient ruins’, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London, 1967), p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. E. Duffy, ‘The English Reformation After Revisionism’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 59 (2006), p. 726 [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Melissa Franklin Harkrider, *Women, Reform and Community in Early Modern England: Katherine Willoughby, duchess of Suffolk, and Lincolnshire’s Godly Aristocracy, 1519-1580* (Woodbridge, 2008), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. When regarding Christopher Haigh’s *The English Reformation Revised*, Duffy states “The contributors to this volume, it should be noted, were in no sense a movement, and they shared no single agenda… A good deal of what is now described as revisionism has nothing to do with a conscious revisionary agenda, but is just the routine work of historians doing what historians always do...” in *Ibid*., pp. 721-722; O’Sullivan, ‘Becoming ancient ruins’, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
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417. Thomas Christopher Banks, *Baronia Anglica Concentrata: A Concentrated Account of all the Barones Commonly called Baronies in Fee* (London, 1844), p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. ‘Sir Ralph Bulmer, jun. and John Thynne. Grant, in fee, for 538l. 19s. 7d., of the reversion of the house and sit of Basedale priory, Yorks., and lands (specified) leased with it 26 November’ in Grants in November, 1544 *Letters and Papers*, vol. 19, p. 408. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. After ‘reminding’ Cromwell ‘of his old suit for the suppressed houses and lands of Rossedale and Keldham’ (*Letters and Papers*, vol. 13: part I, 1538, p. 224), ‘Ralph earl of Westmoreland… also grant, as above, of the manor of Rosedale… and the house, site, and precinct, etc. of the late priory of Keldholm, Yorks., and all lands in Rosedale, Thorpennowe, Keldom, Thornton, Pikring, Newton and Swynnyngton Regis, Yorks., belonging to the said late priories of Rosedale and Keldhom. Clear annual value, 90l. 15s. 9s’ in *Letters and Papers*, vol. 13: part 1, 1538, p. 561; Letter 1003, from Henry VIII, to the Earl of Westmoreland, 1536, *Letters and Papers*, vol. 11, p. 409. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
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430. In NA SC 6/HENVIII/2388, copes are mentioned in the *Ornamenta* section of the monastic possessions, though it is unclear to me whether or not this is the cope to which this note refers. On fol. 6, amongst ‘a cope of slow redde velvette’, there is mention of ‘Item ii copes of olde cloth of gold very olde.’ Given the Opus Anglicanum provenance of the Syon Cope and the gold colour palette of the sewing, it appears likely that this could be a related reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety*, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Chronicle of the Peasants’ War from the House Book, *Katerina’s Windows*, p. 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. William Peryn, *Spiritual Exercyces* (London, 1557), f. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. William Wizeman, *The Theology and Spirituality of Mary Tudor’s Church* (Aldershot, 2006), p. 210; M. C. Erler, ‘The Effects of Exile on English Monastic Spirituality: William Peryn’s Spiritual Exercyses’ *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43 (2012), p. 519. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
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466. M. Oliva, ‘Unsafe Passage: The State of Nuns at the Dissolution and their Conversion to Secular Life’, in Joan Greatrex (ed.), *The Vocation of Service to God and Neighbour: Essays on the Interests, Involvements and Problems of Religious Communities and their Members in Medieval Society* (Turnhout, 1998), p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. C. Cross, ‘The Dissolution of the Monasteries in Sixteenth-century Yorkshire’ *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 80 (2008), p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. See de Costa, *Reforming Printing.* [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Grise, ‘In the Blessid Vynegard of Oure Holy Saveour’, p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. P. Curich, ‘Dissolution and de-conversion: Institutional Change and Individual Response in the 1530s’ in Joan Greatrex (ed.), *The Vocation of Service to God and Neighbour: Essays on the Interests, Involvements and Problems of Religious Communities and their Members in Medieval Society* (Turnhout, 1998), p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. Other pensions, besides Jordan’s 200l, ranged from 50l to a mere 6l; Katherine Palmer, the leader of theirexile abroad, herself received only 6l, perhaps in relation to her relative youth and the time she had beenprofessed. *Letters and Papers*, vol. 14: part II, p. 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety*, p. 121; A 1541 pension list suggests that Jordan is still claiming for herself and a small community of ex-Sion sisters, and two brothers: ‘Agnes Jurdan, abbess of Sion, for herself and Bridget Solyarde, Mary Nevell, Dorothy Sleight, Mary Watno, Marg. Lupton, Marg. Coverte, Ant. Lytle and Ric. Browne, of Sion,’ in *Letters and Papers*, vol. 16, p. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
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476. *Ibid*., p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
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480. For full accounts of Ursula of Munsterberg and Martha Elisabeth Zitter, see Wiesner-Hanks (ed.), *Convents Confront the Reformation*, pp. 39-64 and pp. 81-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
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485. Cristoph Fürer to Katerina Lemmel, ‘Letter 62, 20th December 1525’ in *Katerina’s Windows* (Pennsylvania, 2009), p. 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Pirckheimer*, Journal*, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. C. Cross, ‘Yorkshire Nunneries’, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. *Ibid*., p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. *Ibid*., p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. *Ibid*., p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Oliva, ‘Unsafe Passage’ pp. 101-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. *Ibid*., pp. 103-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. C. Cross, ‘Community Solidarity amongst Yorkshire Religious after the Dissolution’ in J. Loades (ed.), *Monastic Studies* (Bangor, 1990), p. 252 [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
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499. *Ibid*., p. 570. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
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