

The Education of Nuns at Syon Abbey

John Chadfield, December 2012

In this essay, I will argue that the inmate's lives of contemplation and dedicated prayer were the *de jure* reason for the Abbey's establishment, but with help of recent scholarly work and a primary source, this essay will seek to establish the extent of Syon's intended place as a *de facto* institution for the education of women religious. The primary source utilised in this essay will be the *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* which contains instruction for nuns in the vernacular English of the early fifteenth century.¹ This text outlines guidance for the important aspects of their daily religious life; the second, and longest, part of the *Myroure* focuses its guidance towards books and learning and it is from this early fifteenth century work that I will attempt to reinforce the importance of continual education for the nuns at Syon.

The education of women religious was clearly important in the years following Syon's establishment, and this is made clear by five interlinked factors that I will discuss in this paper: the specialist educational experience of the brothers recruited to oversee the nuns' learning, what historians know about the family and educational background of sisters at Syon, the advice and guidance found in *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* that concerns learning and personal development, the importance of books and literacy in the growth of the abbey's culture of learning and the emergence of Syon as a centre of publishing. This last point is key, as it is known that despite their vows of poverty, the Bridgettine rule allowed nuns an unlimited supply of books for personal study.²

As the only English house of Bridgettines, the Order of St Saviour, founded by St Bridget of Sweden (c.1303-73), Syon Abbey was an important and unique establishment in the fifteenth century.³ Founded by lavish endowment of King Henry V, the first stone was laid by the King himself on the 22nd February, 1415.⁴ Before his death, Henry V would establish the royal patronage that would continue, four years after his death in 1426, when his brother,

1 I will cite from the version preserved and transcribed in Blunt, *The Myroure of our Ladye: offices used at Syon* (London, 1873).

2 Bainbridge, Virginia, R. 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415 - 1600' in Jones, E.A, and Walsham, Alexandra, (eds.) *Syon Abbey and Its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion, c.1400-1700* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010) p. 83.

3 The Syon community continued to exist in exile on the continent after the reformation, returning to England in the 19th century. The order, now based in South Brent, Devon, claimed an unbroken lineage to the original Syon. Sadly, the abbey closed this year. *Catholic Herald*. 'Convent Bids Priest Farewell'. April 11, 2011. *Catholic Herald Online*.

4 In Henry V's personal will, written before his famous expedition to France, that would culminate in the Battle of Agincourt, the King left 1000 marks of gold to ensure that the Abbey would be completed in the event of his death. Aungier, G.J, *History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery* (London: Nicholas and Son, 1840) p. 31.

John Duke of Bedford laid the foundation-stone to their new, less marshy and more spacious home further along the river Thames at Isleworth.⁵ This new site would be Syon's new home from 1431, when Henry VI signed letters patent allowing the order to move, until 1539 when the Dissolution saw the order exiled to the continent.⁶

According to the divine specifications for the order, devised by the Swedish mystic St. Bridget and approved by Rome, Syon was to be an enclosed double order, intended primarily for contemplative nuns. From the outset, the abbey was to have a full complement of sixty nuns, thirteen priests, four deacons and eight lay brothers. The deacons in particular, who were also priests, were to assume a role overseeing the religious education of the nuns; assisting them with their learning and devotional life.⁷ This emphasis on learning built in to the very structure of the order from the beginning is a strong indicator of the educational aims of both the foundress of the order and Syon's original English benefactors. These early supporters, including both Henry V and his son Henry VI, demonstrated a systematic patronage of the order⁸ that can be interpreted as, at least, tacit approval of its educational aims.

From the outset, Syon's brothers included men with expertise in women's education. The first confessor-general of Syon, Fr Thomas Fishbourne (d. 1428), was previously attached to St. Albans Abbey where he was a spiritual director to ladies of the nobility. Another original brother, who wrote a biography of St. Jerome, was a scholar and had experience of being the head teacher of a mixed-sex monastic community. The theme of recruiting men interested in the education of women would continue: the third Confessor General was recruited especially for his experience of educational direction for women religious. This man was Thomas Westhaw, a fellow of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge who had taught nuns from nearby Denney Abbey. Westhaw would leave over fifty volumes to the brothers library in Syon for them to continue their role.⁹ The precedent appears to have been set for years to come, as Richard Whitford (d. ?1543) entered Syon a century after its establishment, another women's educationalist with links to Pembroke (also a former master) was known for continuing his predecessors work of translating Latin texts into English.¹⁰ It is clear that both the choice, and attraction of these men reflects the early and continuing importance of the sisters' education to the benefactors and patrons of the Abbey.

At this double house, the abbess ruled over the day to day running of the whole establishment, but the confessor general (the most senior priest) had overarching spiritual

5 Hutchison, Ann, M. 'What the Nuns Read: Literary Evidence From The English Bridgettine House, Syon Abbey'. *Mediaeval Studies*, Vol. 57 (1995) p. 206.

6 Apart from a brief period of restoration during Mary I's reign. Aungier, *History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery*, pp. 52-54.

7 Hutchison, 'What the Nuns Read', p. 207.

8 Whilst ratifying their move and ensuring the continuity of the incomes and tithes arranged by his father, Henry VI in 1431 also extended benefits to the Abbey beyond those of his father's original letters patent. Aungier, *History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery*, pp. 54-55.

9 Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415 - 1600', pp. 91-92.

10 Ibid. p. 93.

jurisdiction over the inmates.¹¹ It is important to note that, although they were part of the same house, the women and men were strictly segregated and any communication took part via a grille. There was only one chapel, but it was designed in such a way that the sisters and brothers could hear, but not see each other. There were dedicated facilities for each sex, including a library complete with a librarian for both.¹² In addition to the leading roles of the abbess, and her deputy the prioress, *The Myroure* informs us that there was also the 'chauntress' and her deputy the 'sub-chauntress'. These two senior nuns were in charge of the smooth running of chapel, for which they required a high level of education and the ability to supervise and improve junior nuns reading and understanding of materials used in services.¹³ From the order's Rule, we also know that this chauntress appointed other positions within the chapel on a rotating, weekly, basis. The roles of 'ebdomary', 'rectors' and 'beginners',¹⁴ demonstrated a hierarchy of escalating responsibility, which required an improved level of literacy at each ascending level.

For both lay women and women religious, the rise of the universities as portals to employment higher office (as well as higher learning) could be seen as having a disastrous impact on the trajectory of women's education.¹⁵ Barred from the universities because of their gender, the most noble-born women may have had private tutors as children, although many families would have seen the nunnery as a sole provider of any kind of higher education for their daughters. The family backgrounds of the nuns who would profess into Syon makes an interesting study into the level of education many nuns would arrive with.

Virginia Bainbridge, from her study of the Syon Martiloge, has established that many of the sisters came from London and Middlesex, in the locality of the Abbey and were rarely from aristocratic families, but instead from the powerful, socially mobile families of royal courtiers, lawyers and merchants. A demographic for whom education was the most powerful tool of social promotion. Not only were these original families aware of the importance of education, which for children of both sexes often started in the home, but the records suggest that the majority of early Syon patrons were from the same social demographic.¹⁶

Upon entering Syon, education continued for these women in the cloister, under the aegis of the college of priests whose main purpose was to train the sisters for the contemplative vocation.¹⁷ *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* was written especially for the nuns by one of the original Syon priests and I believe this text, which originated soon after the Abbey's establishment, is evidence of a deliberate attempt at a programme of structured learning for the incoming sisters.

11 Rhodes, J.T. 'Syon Abbey and its Religious Publications in the Sixteenth Century'. *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jan. 1993), p. 11.

12 Hutchison, 'What the Nuns Read', p. 207.

13 Blunt, *The Myroure of our Ladye*, pp. 56-59.

14 [Rule, ch. xlvj] *Ibid.* p. xxxviii.

15 Bell, David, N. *What Nuns Read* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), p. 59.

16 Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415 - 1600', p. 83.

17 *Ibid.* p. 86.

The exact date and authorship of *The Myroure* are a point of speculation and have not been confirmed. Two candidates have been proposed, based on demonstrated knowledge of the order's liturgy and familiarity with St. Bridget's Roman address: Thomas Fishbourne, the first confessor-general of Syon, or his contemporary, brother and priest Simon Wynter (d. 1448).¹⁸ *The Myroure* is addressed to those Nuns with the lowest levels of literacy, in an effort to put them on the path to the highest possible level available to them: "For lyke as in prayer. man spekyth to god; so in redyngge god spykyth to man. and therefore he oughte reuerently to be herde."¹⁹ This high level of literacy, not only to understand devotional texts in Latin or Middle-English, would be essential for a nun to progress both spiritually and into one of the senior roles open to them, especially that of abbess or prioress.

The abbess managed an enormous property portfolio and liaised with a team of lawyers, accountants and administrators, and so must have taken part in not only an early education in a family household of power and wealth, as Bainbridge asserts²⁰, but also surely in, what we would now call, a form of continuing professional development within the confines of the abbey. Though Part II of *The Myroure* suggests²¹ "we should read, not to seem clever, but to become well-informed, and for our improvement", it would have been clear that a high level of literacy would be beneficial to the Abbey. Not only could greater levels of literacy and learning improve a sister's ability to oversee the education of their junior sisters, the non-religious duties of office for senior nuns made it essential.

Although *The Myroure* disproves of secular books: "For ye oughte to rede no worldely matters. ne worldely bokes. namely such as ar wythout reason of gostly edyfycacyon"²² - research has found evidence of sisters having copies of works by the poets Chaucer, Lydgate and even Boccaccio (translated into French). A printed version of *De Casibus Vironum Illustrium* belonged and was inscribed in both English and French by the ninth prioress (1513-29) Margeret Windsor²³, demonstrating both the acquired learning of long-serving senior nuns and their continued appetite for learning. This is also evidence that not only was the *Myroure* ignored in some cases, but that the sisters were capable, perhaps even permitted, to read for pleasure and intellectual stimulation. Bainbridge advances that those nuns who were educated in Latin and the emerging humanist studies (certainly evident by the early sixteenth century) would go on to become abbesses and prioresses.²⁴ It is not hard to imagine that the educational path to advancement within the abbey was made clear to junior sisters in order to instil an extra incentive into the discipline of reading for improvement for the self and the abbey as a whole.

18 Hutchison, 'What the Nuns Read', p. 209.

19 Blunt, *The Myroure of our Ladye*, p. 66.

20 Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415 - 1600', pp. 90-91.

21 Author's translation. Blunt, *The Myroure of our Ladye*, p. 67.

22 Ibid. p. 66.

23 Bell, *What Nuns Read*, p. 190; Hutchison, 'What the Nuns Read', p. 215.

24 Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415 - 1600', p. 89.

The Myroure's author continues to establish the importance of reading, for an audience of presumably new or prospective nuns. Part II opens with "how ye shall be gouerned in redyng of this Boke and of all other bokes"²⁵ and offers detailed advice on practicalities for the nuns in this endeavour. From this emphasis on the importance of reading, we can infer that the author was aware the reading and education were to form a large part of the nuns day to day life throughout their vocation.²⁶ Ann Hutchison on her research into establishing the contents and use of the nun's library at Syon, suggests that *The Myroure* was intended to be read and then re-visited throughout the nun's lives.²⁷ My interpretation differs in that I believe it to be an introductory text for junior nuns and recruits, extolling the benefits of not only reading but also those of learning Latin and not relying on the vernacular that was becoming more and more prevalent.

The Myroure supports my interpretation, as Part II discusses the nuns not only reciting the Latin, but understanding it from vernacular translations provided by other nuns and within *The Myroure* itself: "And by this difference ye may knowe which ys the bare englysshe of the latyn, and whyche ys putte therto for to expounde yt. And therfore they that so this boke and rede yt may better vunderstande yt then they that here yt, and se yt not."²⁸ *The Myroure* confirms in the next paragraph that the vernacular service books produced by older nuns or one of the brothers, are to be used as a tool to improve literacy in Latin, and not a replacement for learning it altogether: "then the latyn that ys wryten in the begynnyng of eche clause of the englysshe shulde helpe her moche, & dyrecte her that she may go forthe with the reder clause by clause. For else she shoule not knowe by the englysshe a lone where the reder of the laytn were."²⁹

If we accept that reading was an integral part of meditation and a prerequisite for effective contemplation, then the novice nun's education was surely of paramount importance, for contemplation and meditation are the founding ideals of Syon Abbey. *The Myroure*, I believe, should be considered as the first confessor general's attempt at providing a formal learning syllabus of which the largest part is dedicated to attaining and improving the nun's reading and learning skills. This is certainly evidence that the nun's education was a crucial part of founding this double-house, which for several generations attracted the recruitment of university-educated brothers with a special interest in educating women. The knowledge we have of the sisters' library, as well as the ongoing 'culture of learning' that left Syon with the reputation of a publisher over the next hundred years, strongly suggest that works such as *The Myroure* were a success - indeed it was still in use (and printed) over a century after it was originally written in manuscript.³⁰

25 Blunt, *The Myroure of our Ladye*, p. 65.

26 Hutchison, 'What the Nuns Read', p. 209.

27 Hutchison, 'What the Nuns Read', p. 209, 213.

28 Blunt, *The Myroure of our Ladye*, p. 70.

29 Blunt, *The Myroure of our Ladye*, p. 71.

30 Grisé, C. Annette. "'Moche profitable unto religious persones, gathered by a brother of Syon": Syon Abbey and English Books' in Jones, E.A, and Walsham, Alexandra, (eds.) *Syon Abbey and Its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion, c.1400-1700* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), p. 136.

Like *The Myroure* most of the works written by the Syon brothers were part of a wider-educational agenda. A deacon and Syon librarian, Thomas Betson was extending the culture of learning to other communities of women's religious in the late fifteenth century. By the time of Betson's death in 1516, Syon had achieved a distinct reputation for learning, and the fruits of that learning: books. The abbey was becoming involved with both production of manuscripts and, later as publisher utilising the nearby London printing presses.³¹ Little is conclusively known about the nuns' link with the order's early adoption of print, but what we do know is that the nuns were a distinct factor in the community's literary status, which perhaps services as a reflection of the abbey's deep investment in the education of women religious.

Numbered amongst the devotional texts known to have come from Syon are many that demonstrate the ongoing and expanded educational responsibilities of the brothers by providing significant (in some cases, one for each sister³²) copies of texts for nuns to read. It may be that the brothers would come to see the new medium of print as an enhancement to their teaching duties with the nuns.³³ The consequences of both dissolution and Reformation mean that no catalogue of the sisters' library survives. We know far too little to convincingly state the extent of the nuns' involvement with book production. We do know they had their own library, their own librarian and a good few books have survived that bear the names of individual nuns.³⁴ From surviving publications such as *The Myroure* we know that the sisters' were encouraged to read, and were given time to do so³⁵ and along with an understanding of Latin for services, they were to read English books for instruction and edification. The responsibility of providing suitable books for the nuns fell onto the priests of the house. Because of the strict Augustinian Rule of the order (which they incorporated many additions unique to the Bridgettines³⁶) the nuns were not able to communicate directly with the brother priests. It remains unclear as to whether or not nuns received direct tutelage from the brothers, who may have acted instead as spiritual directors, or whether lessons in Latin and reading in English for the incoming nuns fell to senior sisters who perhaps relied on their own earlier, pre-profession education.

Up until the Henrician dissolution of the Abbey in 1539, in addition to its literary reputation, Syon was recognised as a successful source of religious authority and power. It offered the model of religious instruction and observance; it was associated with various prayers and devotions as well as controlling valuable indulgences. These were the marks of a successful

31 Early English printers such as Caxton and his successor de Worde would print books from Syon. Gris . "'Moche profitable unto religious persones, gathered by a brother of Syon": Syon Abbey and English Books', pp. 130-133.

32 Sixty copies of John Rycke's *The Ymage of Loue* were bought by the nuns at Syon, although this work was later recalled as it was suspected of being heretical. Gris . "'Moche profitable unto religious persones, gathered by a brother of Syon": Syon Abbey and English Books', p. 140.

33 Ibid.

34 Rhodes, 'Syon Abbey and its Religious Publications in the Sixteenth Century', p. 15.

35 Aungier, *History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery*, p. 248.

36 'Rule of St. Saviour and St. Bridget', Ibid, pp. 249- 404.

abbey.³⁷ Gris  suggests that the popularity of Syon-authored books was attributable to a deliberate move to create a 'Syon oeuvre' of vernacular devotional literature for the laity, in which the Syon monk as author and Syon nun as reader represent the Abbey's exemplary model for religious education between holders of spiritual authority (the brothers) and those seeking to understand (the sisters).³⁸ The modelling Gris  suggests of the priest/nun relationship in this material was incredibly popular, making some of these works 'bestsellers' of their time.³⁹ I see this successful reproduction of the Syon educational model as evidence of an established and flowering religious curriculum for the nuns. This model also may answer some questions as to how the priests, as educators, communicated with the sisters.

Syon was established to be part of a growing network of educational establishments, and its college of priests was the necessary link between the community of sisters within, and the centres of learning outside of the enclosure.⁴⁰ This method of priests ministering the education of sisters was, from the start, part of the ethos of the Bridgettine Order. From what research has told us about the possession of books from outside the permitted genre (from the Rule, its addition and the guidelines set by *The Myroure*) we can safely assume that the nuns of Syon were keen on 'pushing the boundaries' of learning, and that from the outset that this formed part of the attraction of the Abbey for families and incoming sisters. Certainly, the brothers of Syon from its establishment were recruited from a cadre of scholars particularly interested in the education of women. This culture of learning is reinforced from the outset in the curriculum of *The Myroure*: "And yf ye cannot vnderstonde what ye rede. ask of other that can teche you. And they that can oughte not to be lothe to teche other."⁴¹

The Bridgettines at Syon followed both monastic tradition and the emphasis of their foundress on the acquisition of knowledge. A combination of incredibly well-stocked libraries (figures for the sisters' library vary from between 50 and 70 books⁴², an enormous figure for this period) and the recruitment and retention of priests who were focussed on the education of women religious created the closest thing to a 'college for nuns' possible for this time. In addition, evidence suggests that Syon nuns were from powerful families who understood the social and spiritual benefits of education. Although their method of obtaining that education was less structured than men, who (like many of the brothers of Syon) could attend universities. Through Syon's internal system of education the nuns had access, by proxy, to some of the leading intellectuals of their day which, Bainbridge agrees, gave them the opportunity to become women of learning; a unique attribute in fifteenth and early sixteenth century England. Whether overtly intentional or not, the educational infrastructure put in place at Syon had certainly helped them achieve this status.

37 Rhodes, 'Syon Abbey and its Religious Publications in the Sixteenth Century', p. 24.

38 Gris , "'Moche profitable unto religious persones, gathered by a brother of Syon": Syon Abbey and English Books', p. 143.

39 Ibid. p. 138.

40 Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415 - 1600', p. 91.

41 Blunt, *The Myroure of our Ladye*, p. 67.

42 Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415 - 1600', pp. 102-103.

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