“PARTNERS IN THE SAME”

Monastic Devotional Culture in Late Medieval English Literature

by

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Abstract

This dissertation studies adaptations of monastic literary culture between the first decades of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the English Reformation. My discussion focuses on the writings of John Whethamstede, John Lydgate, Richard Whitford and Thomas More. I argue that, while these authors aim to satisfy readers’ desires for elaborate and authoritative forms of piety, they actually provide models of reading and patterns of disciplined living that restrict lay piety within orthodox boundaries.

I begin with an introductory chapter that situates this adaptation of monastic reading within broader literary and cultural developments, such as the growing popularity of humanist reading and Protestantism, in order to demonstrate that monastic ideals remained culturally relevant throughout this century. This chapter also aims to prompt a further reassessment of the division that is often created between the medieval and early modern periods.

Chapters Two and Three focus on the use of monastic reading practices within a Benedictine context. Chapter Two examines the historiographic poetry and prose of John Whethamstede in which the abbot both positions himself at the forefront of contemporary Latin literature and, at the same time, signals the differences that set the cloistered reader apart from his secular counterpart. Chapter Three examines Lydgate’s incorporation of monastic devotional culture into the *Life of Our Lady* through the depiction of the Virgin as living out an exemplary religious vocation and through the arrangement of the text to facilitate calculated meditative responses from readers.

Chapters Four and Five then shift to the first decades of the sixteenth century. Chapter Four examines Richard Whitford’s orthodox programme of monastic and social
reform that aimed not only to meliorate the individual’s ethical life but also to revitalize Catholicism and engage directly with Protestantism. Finally, Chapter Five looks back two decades to investigate More’s borrowings from different elements of religious life in his *Life of Pico* and *Utopia* that seek to manage the spiritual aspirations of the laity and to depict a society in which, much as in a monastery, the desires of the individual are shaped by and subordinated to the ideals of the community.
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I would also like to acknowledge the instructors, colleagues and friends who have contributed to this project. Geoff Rector’s knowledge and love of monastic *lectio* helped me to lay the foundations for this study, and I can never thank him enough for those early conversations in Kingston and Ottawa four years ago. Fred Lock’s generosity (and patience) helped equip me with the linguistic tools to approach Latin texts with confidence, and Elizabeth Hanson’s interest in my reading of More was critical to the arguments that eventually became the final chapter of this study. Mary Agnes Edsall’s shared love of the *vita contemplativa* brought me to a fuller understanding of meditative reading, and Cristiana Zaccagnino’s knowledge of classical mythology greatly assisted me in fully digesting Abbot John’s coarse grain.
Finishing the Ph.D. is a dream I have harboured for many years, and I could not have reached this point without the support of my family back in Niagara. Thank you, Will, for being a great big brother at very difficult points early on: I’ll never forget our weekly dinners in Toronto. Thanks to my mother, Paula, who first populated my life with books and showed me the riches they contain, and to my father, William, who always encouraged me to pursue those things about which I’m most passionate. I hope these words pay adequate tribute to all the love and support you’ve shown me throughout my life.

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Finally, I would like to thank my beloved wife, Deanna Mason, who brings joy to my life with the dawning of each new day and without whom I could never have found the freedom to be who I am. I dedicate this work to you, my best friend, whose concern and compassion has sustained me through every difficulty over the last eight years. Sei la massima benedizione della mia vita, tesoro mio, «distruggitrice di tutti li vizi e regina de le virtudi» che mi ha svelato tutta la bellezza del mondo.
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Chapter One

Introduction:

The Progress and Adaptation of Monastic Literary Culture Inside and Outside the Cloister in Late Medieval England

I began after my poore maner to wryte in latyn / but your charite preuayled and letted me / for anone as I had set the penne to the boke / it was put in to my mynde to drawer it in the englysshe tonge / wherby it myghe be the more accepte to many / and specyally to suche that understande no latyn and so to make you partners in the same.

—William Bonde The Pilgrymage of Perfeccyon, fo. 1v.

A contemporary of Thomas More and brother at Syon Abbey, William Bonde’s words, written “for all chrysten people to rede,” succinctly express a literary movement, which had at this point been underway for over a century. Central to this undertaking were numerous endeavours to adapt and transform the devotional culture of the cloister to meet the needs of pious laypeople seeking to live a richer spiritual life. This shift focused attention on transposing and popularizing two essential components of its reading culture: first, the specific body of literary and devotional writing originating from within the monastery and, second, the systematic approach to reading which was practised by the monks. This short quotation from Bonde, taken from his vernacular treatise on the contemplative life, The Pilgrymage of Perfeccyon, touches on a number of important concerns that lay at the heart of this effort to adapt monasticism’s literary heritage to a secular audience. What is particularly striking about this passage is its preoccupation with

1 Although these words, appear on the frontispiece of the 1531 edition to the The Pilgrymage of Perfeccyon, Bonde’s treatise was aimed primarily at prelates who would communicate this knowledge to the less learned devout who remained in their cure (see fo. 2) and thus, as J.T. Rhodes notes, “control access to its doctrine of perfection” (“Syon Abbey” 22). Bonde does not identify the person who advised him to write his work in English rather than Latin: it may be that the “you” he refers to is the same “you” he directs his prologue towards—a general body of secular readers.
issues related to the comprehensibility of the text, especially in terms of language, which would come to be associated almost exclusively with Protestant reading. Intending at first to write his treatise in Latin, Bonde is persuaded to write in English so that it might be “the more accepte to many.” There is no doubt that Bonde is concerned about how his work is received by his audience, since he wishes above all to impart the tools for living a devout (Catholic) life to as many readers as possible. Writing in English would certainly respond to the demand of an audience hungry for vernacular religious literature that opened avenues for greater access to more rigorous and enabling spiritual resources.² Yet, Bonde’s choice of words also attests to his desire to render his message as transparent as possible in order to be understood by everyone who reads his text. Not only does Bonde eschew any desire to restrict access to biblical and patristic authority, which he liberally translates throughout his treatise, but he also ensures the text’s accessibility by opting to have his *Pilgrymage* printed rather than copied.³ Each of these textual objectives is closely related to similar attitudes held by Protestant authors who carefully deployed them to make increasingly effective challenges to ecclesiastical authorities. Despite the supposed novelty of Reformation reading practices, Bonde’s

² The popularity of such vernacular devotional literature had continued to grow throughout the Middle Ages. Hillary Carey’s “Devout Literate Laypeople and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Later Medieval England” traces its rise in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries through the proliferation of specific devout practices among the laity, such as Books of Hours, observance of Matins as well as a renewed interest in the Mass. Helen White’s *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion* charts the increasing popularity of devotional literature in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by considering the consolidation of old genres of devotional writing and the rise of new ones better suited to the religious tastes of post-Reformation England.

³ Bonde’s *Pilgrymage* was printed by Wynkyn de Worde, and, although he never explicitly states his preference to have his work printed in order to achieve a wider distribution, this rationale is directly alluded to in the works of other Brothers from Syon Abbey. Richard Whitford, for example, claims explicitly that he has chosen to have his *Pype or Tonne of the Life of Perfection* printed rather than copied in order to reach as broad an audience as possible (see *Pype* 2). On the commitment of the Syon Brothers to printing, see J. T. Rhodes “Syon Abbey.”
treatise clearly manifests “Protestant” attitudes towards the text. Yet, his *Pilgrymage*
also belongs within a Catholic devotional tradition. To understand this apparent
incongruity, it is, I argue, necessary to interrogate more carefully the continuation of
monastic literary culture and its gradual diffusion beyond the walls of the cloister.

The desire of the readers to be “partners in the same” or participants in the
contemplative lives of religious was felt by an increasing number of laypeople throughout
the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and the principal means for accessing this
culture was through reading—more specifically, through the intensely meditative reading
practised in cloisters since the birth of monasticism. This same period, which ranges from
the decades following the publication of Thomas Arundel’s Constitutions up to Henry
VIII’s formal break from Rome, witnessed the imposition of numerous restrictions on
private reading. Yet, this century also saw the frequent adaptation of devotional
practices which were rooted in the solitary activity of monastic *lectio* to a variety of
secular contexts. A core component of monastic life, *lectio divina* offered its practitioners

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4 Jean-François Gilmont singles out the Protestants’ openness to exploiting the press as a means of
circulating ideas and texts as a fundamental element of Protestant reading culture (214). Equally essential to
this reading culture was the Protestants’ avowed commitment to accessing sacred texts in private. This
commonplace regarding the Protestants’ determination to produce a Bible that could be accessible to
anyone who was literate and the important influences which result from their approach to sacred texts have
been discussed most recently by David Daniell in *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*.
5 For the most significant discussion of the detrimental effects Arundel’s Constitutions had on vernacular
religious literature throughout the fifteenth century, see Nicholas Watson’s “Censorship and Cultural
Change.” More recently, however, scholars have begun to revise and reassess the extent to which Arundel’s
Constitutions succeeded in suppressing vernacular theology. In an entire issue responding to Watson’s 1995
article, *English Language Notes* 44.1 (2006) includes a discussion by Katherine Little who argues that
Watson’s claims were overstated and that vernacular theology as a cultural enterprise had lost much of its
impetus by 1409 (see esp. 111). Reacting to the boldness of Watson’s claims that have led to
“overstatement and tabloidization in the writings of other scholars building on his observations”
(“Vernacular Theology” 406), Vincent Gillespie challenges Watson’s claims on the grounds that the
generation after Arundel, which flourished under the episcopate of Henry Chichele, sought instead “to
reclaim the vernacular for orthodoxy and to make it fit for precise and nuanced theological thought”
(“Vernacular Theology” 418). Gillespie concludes by stating that “orthodox and clerical engagement with
vernacularity deserves more sympathetic treatment” (“Vernacular Theology” 419), an important aim which
my study seeks to further.
a powerful devotional tool which facilitated one’s ethical reformation through constant immersion in sacred texts. For the individual, such ruminative reading was intended to be spiritually enabling. In a century in which the material one read was so contested, it may seem paradoxical that such an empowering form of private reading was promoted so vigorously among the laity.

This apparent contradiction may be explained by the fact that while monastic lectio granted lay readers access to an array of sophisticated reading strategies, it also worked to confine its practitioners within a narrow interpretive horizon. By following the elaborate stages required by this programme, individuals were diverted from any potential heterodoxy since their interpretive energies were channelled into a strictly ethical reading of the text. Indeed, the cultivation and dissemination of sacred reading on the part of religious authors is, I argue, one of the chief ways that monasticism participated in the English Church’s struggle to suppress the diffusion of heresy in fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Bonde’s statement clearly reflects this pastoral initiative. Promoted in capitular canons since the fourteenth century, the return to traditional spiritual exercises, such as lectio divina, is simply one of many expedients that Orders as diverse as the Benedictines and the Bridgettines employed to improve the quality of monastic life and to regain some of their diminished spiritual authority outside the cloister.6

6 Efforts to reincorporate lectio into the routines of monastic life may be seen, for example, at the general chapter held at Southwark in 1249 (see Pantin, Documents 1: 37-38). Similarly, at the Evesham general chapter in 1255, the brothers of the community were urged to “attend studiously to sacred reading, meditation and to other such exercises of this type” (Pantin, Documents 1: 55). Within a Bridgettine context, concern over renewing traditional monastic reading practices are present in a variety of works by the Syon Brothers, from Bonde’s Pilgrymage of Perfeccyon to Whitford’s Pype or Tonne of the Life of Perfection. For recent critical discussion on the Bridgettines’ commitment to lectio, see Vincent Gillespie’s “Lukype in halie bukes”: Lectio in Some Late Medieval Spiritual Miscellanies” and “‘Hid diuinite’: The Spirituality of the English Syon Brethren.”
A return to traditional monastic reading is a common thread that runs throughout my dissertation, since this reading programme served as one of the most effective vehicles for communicating the devotional and literary culture which emerged from the cloister in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, while the texts that I discuss never explicitly prescribe the meditative reading practice of lectio divina, a systematic pattern of reading that seeks to accomplish the same goals is present in each of the works I examine. Thus, in the following chapters, I attempt to identify signs of a reading programme that is reminiscent of the more sophisticated exercises observed in the cloister. The criteria I use to locate traces of this distinctive reading strategy include the admonishing of the reader to turn inwards in order to meditate on a passage of text that, through a series of steps, will bring him or her closer to God. Unlike traditional lectio, which is restricted to biblical texts or the Lives of Fathers, the meditative reading that readers are urged to engage in encompassed a broader range of devotional writing. This reading is frequently described as ardent, since it often aims to generate a burning love for the divinity or the Virgin and is also described as stirring the individual to reform him- or herself by leading a more pious life. As I discuss below, this reading, thus, aims to stimulate the interior ethical formation of the reader and not generate new exegesis relating to theological doctrine.

Not simply restricted to reshaping one’s ethical life, the reading programme that authors as diverse as Whethamstede, Lydgate, Whitford and More counsel their audiences to engage is most often used in the service of a conservative pastoral agenda. The desire of laypeople to participate more fully in a form of ritualized devotional life that extended beyond the most basic prayers of the catechism had been well underway at
this point and showed no signs of abating, and many, in searching for exempla on which they could pattern a devout life, turned to the monastery. Indeed, as Gail McMurray Gibson notes, the cloister, throughout the Middle Ages, “defined the ideal spiritual life” (128). Yet, these authors, whose texts provide models ranging from extended Marian poems to a type of secular hagiography, all promote a type of reading reminiscent of monastic lectio as a spiritual exercise in order to confine lay private reading within orthodox paradigms. A more explicit desire to regulate lay reading is the subject of Nicole Rice’s discussion of two spiritual guides, the Abbey of the Holy Ghost and the Fervor Amoris, that encourage its readers to imagine themselves as part of a religious community composed solely of laypeople (17). Borrowing Vincent Gillespie’s phrase, Rice notes that while such guides catered to the “interest in para-monastic forms of spirituality,” they also served to manage lay spiritual aspirations by creating “self-imposed” (21) limits that distinguished lay and religious identity. As Rice notes, the author of the Abbey, distrustful of his readers’ ability to resolve any textual or practical concerns which may arise in reading the guide, advises them to seek assistance from priestly advisers (see 25). The careful attempt of such guides to conform lay piety to “disciplines holding recognized places within ecclesiastical institutions” (Rice 30) generates an obedience in the reader to established social and religious institutions. The texts which I discuss below draw on monastic reading culture as well as its disciplinary structures in less explicit ways to accomplish this regulatory function.

Each of the authors I discuss exploits reading strategies reminiscent of monastic lectio to direct the devotional exercises to which more and more lay readers invested their

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7 On the continued growth of lay desire to participate more fully in increasingly elaborate forms of devout living, see Hilary M. Carey’s “Devout Literate Laypeople and the Pursuit of the Mixed Life in Later Medieval England.”
private moments of repose. In the late Middle Ages, the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy were not always easily distinguishable; in place of any firm divisions, as many scholars have noted, opinions ranged across a broad spectrum, and heresy was often difficult to identify. Promoting a form of meditative reading based on monastic models ensured that readers both remained committed to traditional forms of clerical authority as well as avoided straying into potentially heterodox readings of sacred texts. A pattern of reading whose aim was restricted solely to internal self-evaluation directed readers’ attention away from broader theological issues a text might raise. Moreover, by allowing the reader to feel as though he or she was a “partner in the same” ritualized practices of monks, the exportation of monastic reading along with other forms of their devotional culture fostered obedience to the same community that endorsed these models as authoritative.

Late medieval monastic reading culture, and indeed monastic culture in general, has been vilified for a long time. Well before the Reformation, images of the laxity that had seized the religious orders, which Chaucer so deftly depicts in his portraits of the Monk and Prioress, had penetrated the popular imagination. Such notions regarding the collapse of monastic culture in the latter Middle Ages were only reinforced by Protestant polemicists in the wake of the Dissolution. Indeed, popular hostility towards religious

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8 See Brown 208 and Hudson, Premature Reformation 429.
9 For a discussion of representations of the religious orders in fourteenth-century literature, see Jill Mann 189-201. A. G. Dickens’s Late Monasticism and the Reformation recapitulates many of these common attitudes towards late medieval monasticism and writes of monks who greeted the Reformation with “foxhunt and a jolly dinner party” rather than “an heroic struggle” (20). Finally, Knowles offers a fine discussion of the criticisms against the religious orders in the fourteenth century in The Religious Orders in England 3: 90-109.
10 Marjo Kaartinen notes that two of the most influential pamphleteers writing in support of the dissolution were the humanists Richard Morison and Thomas Starkey, both employed by Cromwell (8). For a recent discussion of popular attitudes towards monasticism during the Reformation, see Kaartinen’s Religious Life and English Culture in the Reformation. A. G. Dickens’s Late Monasticism and the Reformation as well
life persisted into the nineteenth century. Until recent decades, the majority of scholarship on late medieval monastic culture has only complemented this popular disparagement by viewing it as a closed as well as intellectually and spiritually barren institution. David Knowles, perhaps the most eminent historian of medieval English monasticism, expresses this very sentiment in his own criticism of the decay of English religious life: “the monastic order ceased to exert any specific influence outside their own body... and with the opening of the sixteenth century [they were] as an intellectual and cultural force, all but negligible in the life of England” (“Cultural Influence” 159). The portrait Knowles sketches of monasticism as inward looking, decadent, and intellectually exhausted has proven especially persistent. These broader assumptions concerning late medieval religious life have also informed more specific critical discussions of monastic reading culture. Ivan Illich singles out the mid-twelfth century as the point at which monastic reading culture underwent a radical change in direction as the monks moved closer to a scholastic approach to the text which emphasized the acquisition of

draws heavily on contemporary records to develop its portrait of monasticism’s relationship with its early Protestant critics.

11 For an excellent discussion of Victorian anxiety about conventual life, see Herbert Sussman’s *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian literature and Art.*

12 In his larger, three-volume study, *The Religious Orders in England,* Knowles refrained from writing as critically of the state of late medieval monasticism. However, Knowles’s own descriptions of the increasing laxity of male and female houses in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, based on the records of contemporary visitations, support the general trajectory which his study takes towards monastic history as one of slow decline from the fourteenth century onwards (see *Religious Orders* 3: 62-86).

13 While revisionist historians, such as Eamon Duffy, have succeeded in challenging dominant assumptions concerning both the state of religious life in pre-Reformation England as well as the health of the Church prior to Henry VIII’s break from Rome, little attention has been paid to revising our understanding of the religious orders in the century before the Reformation. For the most authoritative discussions of the Church prior to the Reformation, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-1570,* Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors,* J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People,* Christopher Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England,* 1400-1530, R. N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England,* and Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation.* Two important exceptions to the critical neglect of late medieval culture are two excellent collections of essays entitles *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England* and *The Culture of Medieval English Monasticism,* both edited by James Clark.
information and away from a monastic approach which was rooted firmly in the acquisition of moral wisdom. Arguing that this period witnessed the “demise” of traditional monastic reading, Illich notes that by the thirteenth century “even the term lectio divina becomes less frequent and disappears entirely from some contexts.”

However, contrary to this judgement which views traditional monastic reading as being extinct by the end of the Middle Ages, I argue, with John Alford, that such conclusions are “premature” and that we must consider instead how this reading culture evolved in the face of competition from secular learning as well as the rise of lay spirituality.

The principal aim of this dissertation is to explore the innovative ways in which a group of four diverse yet representative monastic and lay authors receive and reconfigure monastic reading and discipline for audiences in the cloister but primarily for those beyond the walls of the enclosure. The discussions that follow are intended to serve as four distinctive portraits within a larger cultural movement that witnessed the transfer of monastic reading from its original institutional setting in the cloister to a variety of secular contexts. Such a widespread and multifaceted translatio was made possible primarily on account of the malleability of monastic reading strategies: textual preferences as well as basic schemata of meditative reading which promoted both allegorical and tropological or ethical reading of texts were easily adaptable for a variety of audiences and a variety of social circumstances that ranged from religious novice to aristocratic householder. Thus, my study does not examine traditional constructions of

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14 Illich, In the Vineyard of the Text 95. For a discussion of the differences between monastic and scholastic reading strategies, see Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God 71-85.
15 Illich, In the Vineyard of the Text 64. Brian Stock notes a similar trend in the disappearance of lectio divina from monasteries in “Lectio Divina e Lectio Spiritualis.”
16 See Alford 48. Indeed, Alford does just this by arguing that Rolle incorporated the traditional monastic reading practice of lectio divina into the content and structure of his English Psalter.
monastic reading as a monolithic interpretative strategy that is only applied to a narrow
discursive field. Rather, I will focus on how traces of this distinctive literary culture can
be found in a surprisingly diverse body of texts and will discuss the various ways it is
exploited to serve a variety of agendas.

The broad diffusion of monastic reading results in large part from two dominant
factors: its receptivity to other complementary intellectual currents and its use as an
effective tool in promoting orthodox religious culture in private, unsupervised spaces.
Religious, and less frequently, laity who regularly observed reading practices originating
in the cloister display a remarkable degree of openness towards secular literary trends.
This receptivity, as I will discuss in my dissertation, is not limited to attitudes toward the
vernacular or to the press but extends outward to encompass more elitist textual cultures
such as humanism. Thus, my dissertation not only seeks to collapse boundaries between
religious and secular intellectual culture but also the equally entrenched periodic
boundaries between medieval and early modern literature. Following James Simpson’s
recent challenge to strict divisions between these two periods in Reform and Cultural
Revolution, my dissertation directs attention to competing models of reading and does not
limit itself to any one particular group or period.

17 During the high Middle Ages, lectio divina was only used in conjunction with the Bible and the writings
of the Fathers (See Leclercq, The Love of Learning 16). Brian Stock comments on meditative reading
strategies applied to a wider range of texts but is quick to distinguish such practices from lectio divina
(“Lectio Divina e Lectio Spiritualis” 174-75).
18 Wallace Ferguson’s The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation offers a
history of the Renaissance as a concept and discusses the cultural break from the Middle Ages which
occurred in a broad range of disciplines. Excluding the polemics of Protestant and humanist authors which
both used the term media aetas pejoratively, the idea of the “Middle Ages” as a discrete period in history
from the modern period was “crystallized in definite and lasting form” near the end of the seventeenth
century in the writings of Christoph Kellor or Cellarius (Ferguson 73). Kellor divided European history into
three phases: antiquity, the middle age, and modern times (Ferguson 73-77).
Simpson’s two categories of reformist and revolutionary reading cultures are a useful model through which we may compare monastic attitudes towards literature in relation to humanist and Reformation reading. In delineating the salient features of “a revolutionary’ literary culture” (33), Simpson notes that this model “obsessively advertises its own novelty and operates within strictly defined and contrasted periodic schemata” (35). As a result, such a culture seeks to obliterate the recent past and approaches its traditions with a spirit of iconoclasm (35). Under this rubric, Simpson places Reformation approaches to literature, such as those expressed by William Tyndale in his biblical prologues that ignore centuries of interpretive tradition and focus instead on literal, ahistorical readings of Scripture. Given the limited scope of his literary history which centres on English writing from 1350-1547, Simpson omits continental humanism from his discussion; yet, as Daniel Wakelin has shown, early humanism participates in the same revolutionary spirit by advertising itself as something completely new, despite the fact that it shares numerous traits with monastic reading. In contrast to this revolutionary literary culture, Simpson posits an alternative model which he labels “reformist.” Unlike the former category, reformist culture draws attention to continuities across large historical gulfs and “operates by accretive bricolage” (35). The monastic reading culture to which the authors I examine belong partakes of this notion of creation from a range of sources by blending aureate rhetorical tastes in vogue at the universities, elements of popular devotional culture, as well as a profound devotion to the poetry and philosophy of antiquity claimed by humanists with the literary and devotional heritage of the monastery. Thus, each of the works I discuss is heterogeneous and draws on a variety

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19 Daniel Wakelin expresses a view of humanism’s desire to present itself as something new in Humanism, Reading, and English Literature 1430-1530.
of diverse literary traditions, and thus each display strong elements of Simpson’s reformist literary model.

My readings, however, focus primarily on points in the text that signal the presence of monastic literary culture and its distinctive meditative reading program. I suggest that careful readings of these passages are useful because they mark specific instances in which important elements of monastic devotional practice are transferred to a novel social context, whether it is religious or secular. I hope to demonstrate how monastic reading served a range of aims whose relationship with one another seems paradoxical. Monastic reading granted lay readers a remarkable degree of freedom to interact with texts and cultivate a rich spiritual life in private and independent of ecclesiastical controls; at the same time, this reading strategy circumscribed its readers’ responses within an interpretive framework that prevented them from straying into heterodoxy. These limitations were made possible on account of the fact that, as Brian Stock notes, *lectio divina* “did not entail interpretation and therefore did not take part in exegesis, hermeneutics, or theology.”20 Instead, meditative *lectio* directed the reader’s attention inward by focusing his or her interpretive energies on understanding how the passage could apply to one’s own ethical amelioration. The dispersal of monastic reading along with other elements of its devotional culture beyond the cloister was an important adjunct to a broader trend within late medieval monasticism to renew itself as well as reassert its position more generally within English religious culture. The movement on the part of the Benedictines to send monks to university had been an important first step in creating a body of learned and highly literate monk-scholars whose hybrid education

20 In “Lectio divina e lectio spiritualis,” Brian Stock asserts that “[è] opportune ricordare che nel Medioevo la *lectio divina* non comportava l’interpretazione del testo, non faceva quindi parte dell’esegesi, dell’ermeneutica o della teologia” (174, my translation in body).
enabled them to create hybrid texts that often wove elements of their own literary heritage into works that participated in contemporary literary trends. By the sixteenth century, humanists such as Richard Whitford and Thomas More devote considerable effort to preserving this distinctive reading culture as well as the disciplinary structures with which it was associated. Thus, my project aims to examine the boundaries which separate monastic reading from secular as well as early modern literature and, by noting its presence in a range of discursive forms, demonstrate its profound significance within late medieval literature as a whole.

**Monastic Educational Reform and the Return of lectio divina**

The popular assumption of English monasticism’s slow and uninterrupted degeneration in the latter Middle Ages has in the last two decades been challenged more and more frequently by scholars who have drawn upon new research from regional archives in order to arrive at a more nuanced portrait of life in specific locations as well as to dismantle this dominant narrative of the decline.\(^{21}\) One very fruitful area for advancing such claims has been the significant alterations monastic education underwent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Particularly important for shedding light on the changing attitudes of monastic pedagogy has been the recent work of Joan Greatrex and James Clark. Both scholars, following David Knowles, stress the importance of Benedict XII’s 1336 bull *Summi magistri* (and the subsequent reform statutes that followed in its

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\(^{21}\) *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, edited James G. Clark, gathers together articles by many of the scholars who have used fresh archival work to overturn assumptions about monasticism’s decline in the late Middle Ages; this collection thus takes an important step in offering new and concrete insights into religious life in this period.
wake) to the restructuring of monastic education.\textsuperscript{22} Although the Benedictines had attempted to renovate the quality of religious life within their cloisters in a series of statutes issued between 1277 and 1343,\textsuperscript{23} Clark notes that this “conscious process of reform” was only fully realized when the papacy endorsed these efforts by promulgating its own binding legislation (\textit{Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England} \textit{11}). The changes enacted by \textit{Summi magistri}, which attempted to reorganize Benedictine life and put a halt to further relaxation of monastic life, have been well documented:\textsuperscript{24} at the core of these reforms was an effort to render religious life more pragmatic while at the same time restoring more traditional and distinctively monastic forms of devotion.\textsuperscript{25} What is important to my discussion is the considerable impact that this legislation had on monastic learning both inside and outside of the cloister. Within the monastery, the curriculum was reorganized in order to focus more concretely on the disciplines of grammar, logic, and philosophy. In a more ambitious move, it became mandatory to send a fraction of the community’s monks to monastic \textit{studia} at the universities in order to complete their education.

Sending monks to universities as the final stage of a programme of studies radically transformed the intellectual climate of English monasticism in the latter Middle

\textsuperscript{22} For a detailed discussion of \textit{Summi magistri} and its overhaul of monastic education, see Knowles, \textit{The Religious Orders in England} 2: 3-6. For the Latin text of \textit{Summi magistri}, see Concilia, ed. Wilkins, 2:585-613.

\textsuperscript{23} For information on these reforms, see Knowles, \textit{The Religious Orders in England} 1: 9-21.

\textsuperscript{24} In addition to Knowles’s discussion of the bull in \textit{The Religious Orders in England}, Peter MacDonald, “The Papacy and Monastic Observance in the Later Middle Ages: The Benedicteina in England” 117-32 offers a thorough discussion of the impact of this legislation and the success of its implementation thoroughwort the latter Middle Ages. See also R. B. Dobson, \textit{Durham Priory 1404-46}, as well as Joan Greatrex, “Monk Students from Norwich Cathedral Priory at Oxford and Cambridge, c. 1300-1540.”

\textsuperscript{25} While it is certainly true that this legislation compromised the rigour of communal life by no longer demanding attendance at refectory meals, chapter meetings or even specific liturgical offices, Clark notes that “there was a conscious effort to give their devotions a more monastic character, and new commemorations for St Benedict were devised and others for local monastic saints and patrons were consciously encouraged” (\textit{Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England} \textit{11}).
Ages. Not only did the new graduate monks assume the leadership of their respective houses as well as orders, but they also came into closer contact with secular intellectual developments and literary trends. This is especially true from the fragments of information that are available from Gloucester College, the Benedictine studium at Oxford which both John Whethamstede and John Lydgate attended. Although life at the monastic colleges was adapted to the traditional horarium in order to reduce the “unsettling influences” of life outside the cloister as much as possible (Greatrex, “From Cathedral Cloister” 51), the years spent at the university promoted a spirit of intellectual openness which made the monks especially receptive to literary culture originating outside the cloister. While the lack of documentary evidence renders a complete reconstruction of the monk’s scholarly interests at the university impossible, James Clark’s meticulous archival research has shed important light on the literary interests cultivated by these scholar monks.

From the available manuscript evidence, Clark highlights the brothers’ pervasive concern for Latin classical literature and the study of rhetoric as defining features of their literary interests. He illustrates the latter by supplying a lengthy catalogue of monks

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27 The educational curriculum of a monk in the late Middle Ages was potentially quite long in duration. In the case of the Benedictines, a monk, after admission into the order, was first expected to memorize the Rule, along with a detailed exposition of it, as well as the Psalter and large portions of the Divine Office. After this, the monk spent years under the tutelage of a master in the monastery learning grammar, logic and philosophy. Finally, the studious monk embarked on a course of study at Oxford or Cambridge which, ideally, led to a doctorate in divinity. The total number of years spent at university could potentially run to seventeen—eight years studying the arts and nine studying theology. See James Campbell’s “Gloucester College” in The Benedictines in Oxford 37-47.

28 My discussion of the literary culture at Gloucester College and all the information contained therein is entirely indebted to James Clark’s excellent article “University Monks in Late Medieval England” as well as his discussion of monastic university education in A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans (62-75). James Campbell’s chapter “Gloucester College” does not discuss the monks’ literary interests nor does it present new research based on archival work. The exact degree of openness fostered at Gloucester College remains,
who copied several rhetorical treatises and who, in some cases, produced their own.\textsuperscript{29}

The fascination with rhetoric, which appears to have been quite pervasive at Gloucester College, no doubt exerted a tremendous influence on the literary tastes of Whethamstede and Lydgate, and seems to explain their predilection for aureate language, whether in Latin or the vernacular. The appeal that these technical studies held for the monks was complemented by their attraction to a broad range of classical Latin prose and poetry—an attraction which undermines claims such as those advanced by Derek Pearsall that monks like Lydgate acquired their knowledge of the classics primarily from *florilegia* (see *Lydgate* 35). In addition to the classical tastes of monks who collected editions of Cicero, Lucan, Sallust, Ovid and Virgil,\textsuperscript{30} the brothers also compiled their own diverse literary anthologies which included genuine classical works and classicizing texts composed mainly in the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{31} It should come as no surprise, then, that many of these monks composed literary works of their own while at Oxford.\textsuperscript{32} Both Whethamstede and

\textsuperscript{29} Especially popular among the monks were rhetorical and dictamenal treatises such as Geoffrey Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova*, Richard of Bury’s *Philobiblon*, and Thomas Merke’s *Liber de modis dictamine*. Among the university monks who composed their own works, Clark cites Hugh Legat, John Woodward, and a certain brother Maurice’s creation of a sequence of letters designed to serve as rhetorical exemplars (“University Monks” 66). Other monks include Henry Cranbrook, who wrote similar models of rhetorical style, and John Lawrence who also displayed an interest in composing such exemplars (“University Monks” 66).

\textsuperscript{30} Clark, drawing upon M. R. James, *The Ancient Libraries of Canterbury and Dover* 298-9, 365, 385-6, 431-3, cites the example of one Canterbury monk who owned Cicero’s *De officiis*, Sallust, and a range of works by Ovid (“University Monks” 67). Clark also points out that William Curteys, future abbot of Bury St Edmunds, obtained copies of Cicero, Ovid, and a complete edition of Virgil’s *Aeneid* while at Oxford (“University Monks” 67).

\textsuperscript{31} Thomas Wybarn who studied at Oxford in the 1460s is an exceptional example of this tendency of the monks to compile anthologies. In addition to copying Lucan and the late antique author Solinus, Wybarn “acquired, compiled and glossed no fewer than sixteen books” (“University Monks” 67). Other anthologies likely to have been compiled at Oxford contain such works as Alan of Lille’s *Anticlaudianus*, Jean of Hauville’s *Architrenius* and Walter of Châtillon’s *Alexandreis*.

\textsuperscript{32} In addition to providing its monk scholars with the inspiration to compose original verse, Gloucester College would have also granted the monks access to potential future patrons. For example, it is probable that while at Gloucester, that Lydgate met Henry V as well as Thomas Chaucer and his circle. On
Lydgate belong to this group. Whethamstede’s commonplace book\textsuperscript{33} contains verses written while he was still a student at Gloucester College, and it is likely that he was compiling excerpts from poetic texts to fill his volume of quotations from poets, the *Pabularium poetarum*. Less poetically ambitious but still eager to display his classical credentials, Lydgate probably translated a portion of Aesop’s *Fabula* while at Gloucester.\textsuperscript{34} As these two examples imply, the literary tastes of the monk-scholars at the university inclined towards the classics generally and more specifically, as Clark argues, towards ancient history and mythography. This conclusion is certainly borne out if one considers the later writings of Whethamstede and Lydgate. Crucially, Clark concludes by denying any claim that the university monks as a whole comprised some kind of “centre of nascent humanism” (“University Monks” 68)\textsuperscript{35} and argues instead that the literary culture which developed at the university was part of its own “distinctive learning environment” (“University Monks” 68). Contributing to this unique atmosphere at the monastic *studia* is, I argue, the strong push within religious culture in general to return to more traditional elements of its devotional programme, particularly monastic reading.

Inside the late medieval cloister a general movement to renew religious life from within had been underway for some time. Although the great period of monastic reform, which witnessed the proliferation of new orders, had passed, the renewal of the Benedictine Order proceeded slowly. Rather than comprising a few sporadic moments

\textsuperscript{33} Now MS. Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College 230.

\textsuperscript{34} Following Lydgate’s translation, a colophon by Shirley indicates that the work was “made in Oxenforde.” See MS. Oxford, Bodl., Ashmole 59, fol. 24v. Whether or not we can trust Shirley’s attribution remains in doubt since scholars have questioned the scribe’s reliability.

\textsuperscript{35} The idea of “Oxford humanism” is alluded to in David Rundle, “Humanism before the Tudors” 30.
marked by a drive to revitalize monastic observance, the long process of reforming the
Black Monks was continual, with peaks and valleys arising at moments of external
pressure and neglect, respectively. One crucial element of this shared process of
renewal—a return to traditional monastic reading culture—may be seen in the oldest
Benedictine foundations as well as in Bridgettine and Carthusian houses. In the
Benedictine context a series of reforms dating back to thirteenth century reveals
conscious efforts made from within the cloister to renovate the order by breathing new
life into its reading culture. At different general chapters, a renewed emphasis was placed
upon postprandial meditative reading\textsuperscript{36} as well as on the monks’ studious attention to
“sacred reading and meditation.”\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, pressure from outside the cloister was also
applied to the Benedictines in the form of the aforementioned bull, \textit{Summi magistri}. This
legislation explicitly admonished a return to earlier ideals and standards of Benedictine
devotional and literary life, and \textit{lectio divina}, the involved programme of monastic
reading, was singled out is one of the most effective means to achieve this.\textsuperscript{38} Although
the English black monks initially resisted much of this legislation through attempts to
have it watered down, its endeavours (along with subsequent papal legislation that sought
to reinforce reforms proposed in \textit{Summi magistri}\textsuperscript{39}) to raise the standard of Benedictine

\textsuperscript{36} The call for a return to this ancient custom came at the general chapter held at Southwark in 1249. See
\textsuperscript{37} At the Evesham general chapter in 1255 the brothers were urged to “attend studiously to sacred reading,
meditation and to other such exercises of this type” (Pantin, \textit{Documents} 1: 55).
\textsuperscript{38} In chapter 7 (\textit{De studiis}) of \textit{Summi magistri}, Benedict asserts the importance of traditional monastic
education when he urges a return to the “primitive sciences” of grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy:
“Because, in truth, the pearl of knowledge is acquired through the skill of reading, and is attained more
intimately through the study of the sacred page to knowledge of divine excellence, and a more rational soul
is produced through a knowledge / recognition of human law, and is more certainly fashioned for justice…
by instructing monks in the primitive sciences in the monastery, in which they live, holding fast to high
things, we want and we prescribe that it be firmly observed.” See further \textit{Concilia} 2: 594.
\textsuperscript{39} On the history of the black monks’ resistance to major attempts at the comprehensive reform of
Benedictine monasticism (in 1273, 1336 and the following years, and 1421) see Knowles, \textit{The Religious
Orders in England} 2: 6. On the Benedictine response to Henry’s attempts in 1421 to renew the vocation of
life, in part through overhauling its educational programme, were well received at select houses, such as St Albans.\textsuperscript{40} The drive to renew monastic learning, which abbots such as Whethamstede exhibit, helped the majority of the community’s members who were not chosen to attend university to sustain Benedictine monasticism’s intellectual traditions.\textsuperscript{41} Of course, the Benedictines did not simply turn inwards. More prestigious houses such as St Albans and Bury St Edmunds produced a large body of pastoral material that transferred these literary traditions to readers outside the cloister. John Lydgate’s expansive body of religious poetry is an outstanding example of one monastic author’s attempts to communicate elements of Benedictine devotional culture to a wider audience. This is especially evident in his \textit{Life of Our Lady}, which, I argue, serves above all as a conduit for meditative reading culture to lay readers eager to participate, if only in part, in the contemplative life. Yet, Benedictine monasticism was only one order that sought to minister to the spiritual needs of the laity by adapting its devotional practices to the

\textsuperscript{40} On the vibrant intellectual culture at St Albans, see James Clark, \textit{A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans: Thomas Walsingham and His Circle c. 1350-1440}.

\textsuperscript{41} Joan Greatrex’s discussion of the cathedral priories of the black monks sheds light on how these brothers accomplished this. Surveying a range of texts belonging to the three areas of grammar, biblical and theological studies, and historiography, Greatrex notes the continued fidelity within claustral libraries to an older monastic literary tradition that managed to retain its own distinctive qualities despite the pervasive influence of scholastic studies (“The Scope of Learning” 49). Greatrex goes on to note that Uthred of Boldon, one of the most distinguished Benedictine graduates, expressed a reservation about introducing the culture of the university into the monastery. Arguing that Uthred “spoke for the majority of his less visible brethren when he voiced his uneasiness about the ‘excessive intellectualism’ at Oxford,” Greatrex points out that while he did employ scholastic learning when writing on monastic life, his fundamental theme was always “the primacy of spiritual values for the monk” (“The Scope of Learning” 49). This is especially evident in the diverse number of theological and historical writings held in and produced for monastic libraries in the latter Middle Ages. Indeed, in terms of the diverse body of theological writings, Greatrex cites texts ranging from standard authors such as St. Bernard, Hugh of St. Victor, Isidore of Seville to works such as Bernard of Cassino’s commentary on the \textit{Rule}, Augustine’s \textit{Confessions} as well as devotional tracts and treatises on monastic profession (“The Scope of Learning” 47). She also draws heavily on Leclercq’s distinction between monastic and scholastic theology to note the different approaches of these two communities to a given topic. Greatrex later notes the maintenance of traditional genres of historiography such as the universal history and the chronicle that recorded events in the single monastery (“The Scope of Learning” 50).
exigencies of secular life: during the first decades of the sixteenth century, the community at Syon Abbey produced large amounts of religious writing for lay consumption.

Since its foundation by Henry V, Syon boasted a sophisticated literary culture which set it apart from the majority of religious houses in England: by the sixteenth century, however, the abbey further “enhanced” its public reputation, as J. T. Rhodes puts it, by “the way it reached out to serve people’s religious needs and to guide their spiritual aspirations” (“Syon Abbey” 12). Syon had become a centre for the production of devotional literature, and part of the reason for its literary output (as well as the abbey’s popularity with aristocratic clients) was that, as Vincent Gillespie notes, “the Syon brethren were expected to have a decisive and effective pastoral programme and to offer spiritual guidance and leadership” (“Book and the Brotherhood” 187). The success of this programme is borne out by the diverse body of religious literature produced by a handful of brothers, including Thomas Betson, Richard Reynolds, Stephen Sawndre, John Steyke, and Richard Whitford. By no coincidence, each of these authors was a Cambridge graduate who entered Syon at some point after completing his studies. Although these authors came to the religious life later, their writings uphold the value of that vocation and are committed to transferring the devotional culture of the cloister to lay audiences as fervently as the work of Whethamstede or Lydgate. At the heart of this return to monastic tradition is a return to the meditative reading culture which flourished in medieval monasteries.
Central to traditional monastic education, from late antiquity to the high Middle Ages, is *lectio divina*. Essential not only for the cultivation of the monk’s spiritual life, *lectio* was crucial for the transmission and acquisition of knowledge within the community. Practised by monks for centuries, this involved reading methodology consists of four steps, although commentators would often drop the third exercise or conflate it with the final stage of the reading programme. Progressing from reading to meditation to prayer and finally to contemplation, this highly systematic approach to the text was one of the core spiritual exercises of monastic life. The various stages in this process may be briefly elaborated as follows. During the first step, reading or *lectio*, the monk simply reads the text aloud in order to comprehend the literal meaning of what is on the page. The second stage, meditation on the text, consists of actively committing the passage to memory and further assimilating the material by drawing connections between the *lectio* and other texts previously stored in the memory. This stage marks the beginning of the interpretive process aimed at facilitating a deeper understanding of the work. During prayer, the third step, the text is given a personal gloss or ethical interpretation by the monk as he applies the scriptural reading to his own experience and thus furthers his assimilation of the sacred text in order to bring him closer to God. Contemplation of divine things, the culmination of *lectio divina*, lies at the end of this deep engagement with the sacred page. This deep commitment to the text sets off the position of *lectio divina* among other spiritual exercises practiced by the monk and

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42 The most eloquent and detailed discussion of *lectio divina*’s centrality to monastic reading culture is certainly Jean Leclercq’s *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*. Drawing on numerous primary sources, Leclercq describes the centrality meditative reading to the monastic vocation as a tool for completely reshaping the interior life of the monk.

43 This fourfold process was outlined in c. 1159 by Guigo II in his *Scala Claustralium*. See further Guigo II 68.
adapted for the laity, which also included fasts, vigils, and bodily deprivation.\textsuperscript{44} Beyond
the significant weight placed on \textit{lectio} by the \textit{Rule of St. Benedict} and in the writings of
its predecessors, most notably John Cassian, the salutary nature of this involved reading
programme was stressed and explored by the early consolidators of Western
monasticism.

The use of \textit{lectio divina} as an instrument for the formation of the monk may be
traced back to the earliest writings of Christian monasticism, which codified this practice
for subsequent generations. Benedict’s \textit{Rule} gives a precise timetable of when monks
were to read in community, during the celebration of the Divine Office, and when they
were to read in solitude.\textsuperscript{45} Given that the \textit{Rule} does not afford monks much private
physical or psychological space, the ample space that is allotted to reading is indicative of
its efficacy as a tool for the individual’s moral formation and spiritual regulation. The
salutary role of reading and its function as an instrument for the formation of the monk
appear, however, at various points in the text. Such a role for reading is, I argue below,
certainly alluded to in Whethamstede’s dream of St Bernard. Within the \textit{Rule}, a clear
example of the operative effects of meditative reading may be found in Chapter 28, when
Benedict describes various methods for disciplining the monk and includes among them
the “medicine of divine Scripture” (28. 225) to remedy any spiritual or moral ailment.
Indeed, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries monastic authors returned to this notion
and applied \textit{lectio} as an antidote to heresy. This metaphor perfectly captures the monastic
notion of reading as a source for the instruction and formation of the monk’s ethical life.

\textsuperscript{44} See, for example, John Cassian, \textit{The Conferences} 7.1.
\textsuperscript{45} See further Chapter 48 “De opera manuum cotidiana” in \textit{RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and
English with Notes} 48, 248-53. All citations from the Rule of Saint Benedict refer to the chapter and page
number of the bilingual Latin English edition translated and edited by Timothy Fry et al.
Here, Scripture serves as a restorative cure for an ethical ailment and works, through meditative reading, to nourish a brother who has deviated from the norms of acceptable behaviour. Benedict’s Rule further stresses the formative role played by monastic reading through his repeated use of the verb *aedificare* (whose meanings range from “to build,” “to instruct,” and “to edify”) to describe the action performed by the reading monk. Such metaphors suggest the highly dynamic role of monastic reading as a catalyst not only for one’s interior ethical formation but also for the performance of ethical behaviour in the community.

The development of a reading programme—rooted in sacred texts and the works of the Fathers—to effect a moral transformation is also present in Cassian’s *Conferences*, a work to which Benedict directed monks searching for a more perfect life. In that work Cassian privileges *lectio divina* as the most effective tool to enact the ethical formation of the monk. Much of Cassian’s first conference with Abba Moses concerns the “tools of perfection” that, in turn, lead to purity of heart—the final goal of monasticism—and chief among these tools is biblical *lectio*. More specifically, Abba Moses admonishes Cassian and his friend Germanus that diligent reading be used “for the sake of cleansing the heart and chastising the flesh” (1.10.1). Frequent reading and continuous meditation on Scripture not only put the distractions of the world to flight but also, and more significantly, ensure that the monk will “cultivate the earth of [his] heart with the gospel plough” (1.22.2). While such rhetoric emphasizing the nurturing role played by *lectio* abounds in this first conference, these examples are sufficient for illustrating Cassian’s

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46 See especially the following chapters in the *Rule of St. Benedict*: 38, 42, 47, and 53.
47 In the last chapter of the Rule, Benedict counsels his followers to read Cassian’s *Conferences* and *Institutes* in order reach the “heights of perfection” (*Rule of St Benedict* 73). The prescription of Cassian as recommended reading also appears in the *Rule* at 42.
48 See especially Cassian, *Conferences* 1.7.1.
notion of reading as a formative exercise responsible for shaping the individual personality of the monk and constraining the range of his meditations within well-defined boundaries. Indeed, the metaphors both Cassian and Benedict employ are noteworthy since they treat the monk as both raw material and product: for each author, reading figures as the agent of a symbolic rebirth.

Beyond the moral development and ethical formation of the monk, *lectio divina* was also a crucial tool for creating a distinctive interpretive community out of the various monastic houses spread over wide geographical distances. Benedict’s prescription that the brothers devote such a large amount of time to communal reading contributed to the textual homogeneity that knit a range of people together within the cloister. Such homogeneity, as Mary Carruthers notes, was ensured by the fact that a group of individuals shared a similar body of literature which they read in a consistent manner by applying identical meditative reading strategies to sacred texts and by drawing from a uniform exegetical tradition to understand them better. Reading was not simply an individual pursuit, and we can see how monastic formation was used to reinforce communal bonds in the establishment of a core of shared texts that each monk was responsible for memorizing and assimilating, such as the *Rule*, the Psalter and large portions of the Divine Office. This nucleus of monastic texts along with a handful of genres cultivated within the cloister, such as hagiography and historiography, not only

49 Cassian returns to his discussion of reading on Conferences 9, 10, and 14. For an excellent discussion *lectio divina* in the *Conferences*, see Conrad Leyser, “*Lectio Divina, Oratio Pura: Rhetoric and the Techniques of Asceticism* in the ‘Conferences’ of John Cassian” 79-105.

50 See Stock, *Implications of Literacy* 405.

51 See *Craft of Thought* 105-107.

52 For a number of excellent discussions of the education of the English Benedictine monk in the Middle Ages, see *Medieval Monastic Education*, edited by George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig. A thorough discussion of the Benedictine novice’s programme of instruction, which included training in and memorization of the *Rule*, the Psalter and the various offices of the liturgy of the hours, during the late Middle Ages may also be found in Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans* 51-62.
impressed a staunchly pastoral mark upon monastic literary culture but also shaped monastic literary sensibilities that were distinct from those outside the cloister.  

The Convergence of Monastic and Humanist Approaches to the Text

During the fifteenth century, the distinctive reading culture of the humanists appeared in England for the first time and slowly began to take root and grow in influence. A difficult (and sometimes controversial) term, humanism denotes in my discussion a well-defined course of studies. This programme, called the *studia humanitatis*, included the study of *grammatica*, *rhetorica*, *poetica*, *historia*, and *philosophia moralis*, which aimed at providing instruction to secular princes. Each of the disciplines cultivated by humanists were ideally suited to the training of a contemporary statesman: studying grammar, which ensured proficiency in Latin, enabled one to function within the state bureaucracy; knowledge of rhetoric and poetry permitted one to express ideas eloquently and persuade others; and moral philosophy enabled one to distinguish between morality and expediency. Thus, unlike the liberal arts of the earlier Middle Ages, the humanities omitted the disciplines of the *quadrivium*, that is *arithmetica*, *geometria*, *astronomia*, and *musica*. As this programme became more established people began to apply the name *studia humanitatis* to the collective study of these disciplines and the term *humanista* to

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53 For a useful discussion of the various literary genres that flourished within the cloister and their repeated emphasis on the edificatory nature of literature, see “The Fruits of Monastic Culture: Literary Genres” in Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* 153-91.

54 Although he defines humanism programmatically in terms of education, Paul Oskar Kristeller’s definitions of humanism are generally held to be the most precise and are certainly the most often quoted. My definition of humanism is entirely owing to his excellent discussion in “Humanism” 113-37.

55 The term *humanitas* was associated with a liberal education by certain Roman authors such as Cicero. Later, Petrarch and others revived the use of this word and used it to refer to the curriculum outlined above.

56 For a brief discussion of the humanists’ role as educators of rulers, see Kristeller’s discussion of the humanist education under the section “professional activities” in “Humanism” 114-118.
the person who lectured in them at a university. A humanist, according to this definition, is one who engages in a set of literary studies based on these five branches of learning and demonstrates a commitment to classical literature as a means of cultivating his own ability to emulate the Latin of antique authors as well as providing moral standards. In his recent study *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature 1430-1530*, Daniel Wakelin adds that humanism ought to be thought of as a “practice” and emphasises that “[a]ctivities and not ideas are what we can trace in the manuscripts and printed books which survive” (9). Rejecting the notion of humanism as a “philosophical-ism or world view” (8), Wakelin instead cites the utility of David Carlson’s phrase “humanist gesture” and points to such activities, which need only have been engaged in intermittently, such as the composition and correction of Latinate verse, the reconstruction of Cicero’s lost works from classical dictionaries, the addition of indices, marginalia, and glosses to a range of works, as well as advising the middle class on what not to read (9).

Wakelin’s study, however, breaks with more traditional discussions of humanism by stressing the degree to which humanist scholars, through their indices, marginalia, and glosses, constrained rather than opened the reader’s encounter with the text. Attempts to “control the reader” (210) by directing his or her reading appear in such textual aids as translations, treatises on works, prefaces as well as glosses. Wakelin’s careful discussion of the humanist scholars who employed these editorial tools to direct a reader’s response is, however, sympathetic rather than censorious. These humanists, he argues, “replaced

57 See further Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance” 346-74, Paul F. Grendler 207-12, Augosto Campana 60-73.
58 For David Carlson’s notion of “humanist gestures,” see *English Humanist Books 5*. Carlson employs this phrase to denote the periodic appearance of a desire to return *ad fontes*. 

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dialogue with instance” on account of their conviction that reading these texts in this fashion was “an act of great importance” (210). In this regard, the humanists have much in common with the early Reformation theorists who, like Tyndale, offered new and unprecedented access to the Bible while at the same time took similar editorial precautions to guide his readers’ interpretation of the text.59

Scholarly consensus locates humanism’s arrival in England during the fifteenth century. Roberto Weiss’s *Humanism in England during the Fifteenth Century* was the first major study in English on the appearance of humanism on the island and credits Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, for creating “a revision of established values... necessary [for] humane standards... to be adopted in this country” (39). Although humanism is said to have arrived with the papal functionaries Poggio Bracciolini and Pietro del Monte in the first decades of the fifteenth century, Weiss reserves most of the credit and praise to Humphrey’s interest in humanist books and recruitment of Tito Livio Frulovisi as his secretary and biographer for his late brother, Henry V (see Weiss 39-70). It is only decades later that Englishmen begin to travel to Italy in order to study under this new curriculum: William Grey, Richard Bole, Richard Flemmyng, and John Free all cultivated, under the direction of Guarino da Verona, a sophisticated understanding of the Latin classics, attempts to gain a command of Greek, as well as an eagerness for acquiring editions of Latin and Greek texts (Weiss 84-127). It is only in the beginning of the sixteenth century, according to the dominant historical narrative, that an English-born

59 Challenging the popularly held assumption that Tyndale and Luther were in favour of private biblical interpretation, Simpson argues that Tyndale in fact was quite concerned about controlling personal readings of Scripture (see especially *Burning to Read* 126-41).
humanist tradition emerges with Thomas More as the first person to export humanist learning from the British Isles.\(^{60}\)

More often than not, however, intellectual historians who trace the emergence of humanism in England omit that many of the scholarly activities and concerns promoted by the humanists were also shared by religious in the cloister.\(^{61}\) It is this critical neglect of monastic intellectual culture that has led to confusion over certain works of literature as well as a denial of a native monastic humanism that emerged in tandem with that of the more clearly articulated Italian programme. Marc Fumaroli stands out as one of the very few scholars who have discussed monasticism’s close proximity to humanism. Fumaroli’s discussion of the relationship between humanist reading habits to those practised within a monastic reading community are especially persuasive. One area in which these two groups converge concerns the “special mastery of time” required to gain access to a text, which was understood under the rubric of *otium* (Fumaroli 140). This concept was certainly far from new. Cicero, who viewed *otium literatum* as the most perfect form of *otium cum dignitate* since it allowed the active man to refresh himself

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\(^{60}\) See Weiss 183. This dominant view is echoed in Nauert 114-21 and more briefly in Carlson, *English Humanist Books* 13-15. There have been some noteworthy attempts to develop a more sophisticated vision of this familiar narrative of humanism’s arrival in England. David Rundle’s chapter “Humanism before the Tudors: On Nobility and the Reception of the *Studia Humanitatis* in Fifteenth-Century England” in Reassessing Tudor Humanism argues persuasively against Humphrey’s humanist credentials and suggests instead that he was only lionized as a means of securing patronage. David Carlson contributes to a more nuanced understanding of humanism in England during the latter fifteenth century in his study *English Humanist Books* by examining the reception of books produced directly for the English aristocracy between 1475 and 1525.

\(^{61}\) An important challenge to this critical neglect of monastic culture, as well as prevailing assumptions about the stagnation of the Middle Ages in general, is Charles Homer Haskins’s polemically named study *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*. Haskins challenged prejudices against the Middle Ages that saw it an “epoch of ignorance” by locating many of the same activities with which the humanists were engaged in the twelfth century. The revival of Latin literature and the flourishing of new compositions in Latin, the revival of jurisprudence, historical writing, science and philosophy as well as an interest in Greek and Arabic literature are intellectual endeavours which Haskins discusses in a medieval context, which are often held to be the exclusive concerns of the humanists. Although Haskins does not focus exclusively on monastic culture, he does discuss the importance of monasteries as furnishing Western European intellectual life with one of its most important centres (see 32-47).
from stresses of political life, and Seneca, who developed this notion further when claiming that *otium studiosum* constituted a more noble vocation, were simply the most prominent classical expositors of this idea (Fumaroli 140-41). In the Middle Ages, this notion of *otium* as studious retreat became, as I have noted above, an integral part of monastic life, and it is precisely to this model of contemplative life that Petrarch and later humanists were drawn.

Petrarch had a brother who was a Carthusian and he thought of joining him; Petrarch himself was a cleric, and few things are more important in his work than the symmetrical treatises *De Otio religioso*, written for monks, and *De Vita solitaria*, for literary scholars like himself. In many points the relationship is a direct one, and it is clear that the thousand-year experience of monasticism filters the imitation of the Ancients that the first humanists, spiritual sons of Petrarch, claimed. Thus, the monastic elevation of writing to the rank of spiritual exercise removed the servile aspect that had been attributed to it by Antiquity. (Fumaroli 141)

Petrarch’s return to this classical ideal of *otium* can only be accomplished through the mediation of centuries of monastic reading, and his efforts, along with those of his followers, to elevate reading and writing to the status of a spiritual exercise are simply the transferral of basic elements of this tradition onto a secular context. In addition to the desire for *otium* as the ideal repose for concentrated reading and writing, early humanists exported and adapted literary genres esteemed in the cloister such as sermons and lyric hymns, epistolography, historiography, as well as the biography, which afforded the early community of scholars with exemplars of studious discipline. The crucial difference, then, between a monk and humanist, concludes Fumaroli, was “above all disciplinary in nature,” as the monk submitted himself to the rule of his Order and authority of his Abbot while the humanist imposed a strict discipline upon himself (143).

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62 Fumaroli 143. On the literary genres which enjoyed the most popularity within the cloister, see Leclercq, *Love of Learning* 153-190.
While Fumaroli’s argument limits itself to the early humanists’ transposition of monastic ideals in order to create its own pan-national literary order, his foregrounding of humanism’s significant debts to monastic culture lucidly illustrates a wide range of shared interests that often contribute to critical misidentification and misunderstanding. Few poets have suffered more from this tendency than John Whethamstede and John Lydgate, both of whom have been attacked (often virulently) as being either failed humanists or simply incapable of even comprehending the humanist movement. Thomas More’s literary (and spiritual) debts to monastic culture, in contrast, have been almost entirely ignored by scholarship, a fact which has worked in favour of bolstering the reputation of his writing as the first and most remarkable flowering of English humanism. Yet the predisposition to ignore More’s monastic intellectual heritage has, I will argue below, created not only a slightly distorted picture of Utopia but also a skewed vision of his own literary sensibilities. Although overstressing the influence of monastic culture would simply invert this imbalance, my dissertation attempts to redress this scholarly neglect of the important role monastic reading continued to play in the late Middle Ages. In place of classifying these authors either as distinctly monastic or as early humanist, I wish to suggest that these boundaries ought to be viewed as highly porous, as the careers of both Richard Whitford and Thomas More indicate. However, despite the permeability of these boundaries, my dissertation will argue the important role that the cloister still played in the literary and intellectual formation of Whethamstede, Lydgate, Whitford and More. Scholars, frustrated after having sought the presence of “humanist

63 Roberto Weiss offers the most damning account of Whethamstede’s failings as a humanist in Humanism in England During the Fifteenth Century 13-38, while Derek Pearsall rejects arguments supporting Lydgate’s humanism (advanced by Walter Schirmer and Alan Renoir) in his article “Lydgate as Innovator” 10-13.
gestures” in the writing of Whethamstede and Lydgate, would be better rewarded, I argue, by paying closer attention to these authors’ investment in the literary culture of contemporary English cloisters rather than in a hoped-for association with Italian humanism. Intersections between English monastic and Italian humanist reading culture extend beyond the shared body of linguistic and literary ideals which I have just discussed. Like the humanists, monastic authors were deeply concerned with elevating the status of their reading community as well as transmitting its ideals to diverse audiences.

A willingness to embrace the use of the vernacular, a characteristic which one often does not associate with either monastic or humanist reading culture, existed in England early in the fifteenth century and testifies to an eagerness on the part of both communities to accommodate the needs of a less-learned readership. Daniel Wakelin carefully notes how vernacular humanism took root in England partly as a response to the demands from elite aristocratic patrons and partly to the exigencies of academic life at the universities. The earliest and most ambitious example of aristocratic patronage of vernacular humanist works, argues Wakelin, is Humphrey, duke of Gloucester’s commissioning of two translations that respond to his humanist and political concerns: *The Fall of Princes*, Lydgate’s translation of Boccaccio’s *De Casibus virorum illustrium*, and *On Husbondrie*, the poetic rendering of Palladius’s agricultural treatise *De re rustica* (23-61). According to Wakelin, the vernacular was used not just to secure the patronage of busy elites who lacked the leisure to wade through Latin editions: it was also an important aid in the schools. One such aid, John Anwykyll’s *Vulgaria quedam*

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64 Of course, Lydgate did not translate directly from Boccaccio’s Latin text but from Laurent de Premierfait’s French rendering of the work which was composed c. 1400.
abs Terencio, printed in 1483, consisted of lessons in translation based on material from Terence’s plays. While such textbooks were certainly not new, Anwykyll’s Vulgaria not only demonstrates the place of the vernacular in teaching at advanced levels but more importantly stands out as the first to take Latin phrases from an identified classical author (Wakelin 137; Kuskin 242-43). In a similar vein, William Kuskin draws attention to Caxton’s printing of works of vernacular humanism that, he argues, helped fashion a “vibrant, international laureate system centred on the court and moving outward to define English culture” (241). While I would hesitate to align Caxton with the early humanists, the work of these critics demonstrates that early humanists realized that successfully inserting themselves within an English literary culture often entailed transferring their distinct set of reading practices into the vernacular. This transmission was an essential element of promoting their curriculum as well as themselves. Remarkably, though perhaps not surprising given the number of correspondences already mentioned, monastic reading culture embraced an extraordinarily similar set of strategies for promoting its unique devotional reading culture.

Adapting the distinctive reading habits of the cloister to a range of audiences from elite aristocratic patrons to devout middle class readers, monastic authors show themselves equally competent at promoting their own literary culture through the vernacular as well as the press throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Lydgate is an interesting case given that while many critics identified humanist elements in his vernacular historiography, no scholar has explored his equally systematic transposition of elements of monastic reading culture in his devotional poetry. I will attempt to remedy this critical oversight by arguing below that Lydgate, eager to
participate in the renewed pastoral initiative of the Benedictines, was just as interested in exporting monastic reading culture to his elite patrons. This desire on the part of monastic authors to adapt their own distinctive reading practices for broader, secular consumption continued throughout the century right up to the eve of the Reformation.

Although present in diverse houses and in various orders, monastic authors active in the early decades of the sixteenth century at Syon Abbey possessed a remarkably sophisticated pastoral programme based on the production of vernacular literature that secured for the abbey its position as a centre for religious publication in that late Middle Ages. Among the brothers at Syon, Richard Whitford like many early humanists was not only receptive to innovations like the press and the use of vernacular but was also keenly adept at promoting the literary and devotional culture of the monastery in order to ensure that the spiritual aspirations of pious laypeople remained within the boundaries of orthodoxy. Of course, monastic authors were not the only writers to use the vernacular as a means for exporting elements of the rich literary and devotional heritage of the cloister. Thomas More’s vernacular *Life of Pico* participates, as I will argue in my final chapter, in the transmission of monastic culture to a diverse range of religious and lay audiences. Thus, just as humanists attempted to extend their influence by promoting their curriculum, religious authors or, in the case of More, lay authors with a firm commitment to the ideals of the religious life, exported monastic customs to reinforce traditional forms of piety and resist the growing popularity of Protestantism. Vernacular devotional literature which attempts to renew traditional meditative reading practices of the cloister functions in a similar manner to the humanists’ curriculum: the reader, as I have noted above, is granted access to that reading community in which the particular reading
strategies, and in many cases the number of possible readings are determined in advance by authors of these works.

**Reformation Reading and Monastic Literary Culture**

In addition to cultivating textual practices akin to those of the humanists, fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century devotional literature manifests important characteristics generally associated with a Reformation reading culture. However, owing to the success of the early modern period’s erection of artificial boundaries between itself and the Middle Ages as well as its frequent obfuscation of restrictions placed on Protestant reading, these similarities are rarely noted. One major factor contributing to this apparent gap between medieval and early modern textual practice results more from the “anxious attempts,” as Gordon McMullan and David Matthews label it, to suppress any traces of medieval culture than actual fact (2). Given the determination of Reformation authors to separate themselves from the dominant religious culture, it is not surprising that scholarly criticism has largely accepted claims relating to the novelty of their project.65 Many discussions of the newness of the Protestants’ approach to the text centre on their exploitation of the press as well as their unique attitudes towards solitary reading.66

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65 Such assumptions are reinscribed annually by general introductions to the Reformation in English Literature Anthologies. For example, in the most recent eighth edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the editors describe Luther’s unprecedented challenge to Catholicism as having been done “in the name of private conscience enlightened by a personal reading of the Scriptures” (490). Eager to emphasize the newness of Luther’s approach to biblical reading, such assertions, moreover, rely on and promote a one-dimensional and monolithic understanding of reading in the Middle Ages.

66 Of course, direct access to vernacular Bibles is an idea that is central to the thought of Wyclif and his followers who were dubbed the Lollards. Indeed, the reading culture which the Wycliffites promoted bears a number of similarities to approaches the Reformers would develop a little over a century later on the continent and in England. Wyclif maintained that the Bible alone was the sole authority and “single validating law” (Hudson, *Premature Reformation* 228). Indeed, such dependence on scriptural authority
Indeed, in his discussion of Protestant reading cultures, Jean-François Gilmont highlights the reformers’ willingness to embrace printing as a tool to accelerate the circulation of texts and ideas as one of its most important definitive features (214). A corollary to this openness to the press was not only the growth of private libraries but also the further expansion of solitary reading.

The careful restriction of individual biblical interpretation is another characteristic shared by these two reading cultures. Certainly, extensive solitary reading was made possible due to the reformers’ shared commitment to bringing Bibles and an array of catechetical and exegetical material into the vernacular. According to dominant historical narratives, it was this access to religious reading material in the vernacular, which sprang from the reformers’ commitment to the Bible as an open text whose meaning was available to everyone, that provided readers with an opportunity, as David Daniell enthusiastically puts it in his discussion of Tyndale’s Bible, to generate “rich continents of a new, and different understanding of New Testament faith” (xx). However, contrary to such exuberant accounts of widespread access to sacred texts upon the arrival of the vernacular Bible, Gilmont points out that when the various Protestant churches were

alone is a consistent theme that runs throughout Wyclif’s writings. Rita Copeland’s summary of these broad themes in her discussion of Lollardy and the politics of the literal sense is especially insightful. Copeland singles out the major topics: first, the notion that the Bible should be available in English so that all Christians could study it regularly; second, lay people should apply their own common sense to matters of sacramental faith; and third, the deepest truth of Scripture is found in the literal sense of the Bible (Pedagogy 112-13). Despite this emphasis on Wyclif’s doctrine of sola scriptura, the Lollards’ effort to render the Bible in English was, as with the Reformers of the sixteenth century, accompanied by a major effort to provide comprehensive vernacular commentaries, such as the so-called Glossed Gospels, in order, as Anne Hudson notes, to “facilitate the understanding of the literal sense at the centre of the biblical message” (Premature Reformation 248). This impression of Wyclif’s attitudes towards the Bible has a long tradition: contemporary critics such as Reginald Peacock and modern scholars stress that the Wycliffites privileged a literal interpretation of scripture while eschewing allegory, thus emphasizing the similarities between the reading cultures of the Lollards and the Reformers. However, Hudson, quite correctly, is sceptical of this image and suggests that it may be an oversimplification (see Premature Reformation 228-277). For a concise discussion on the debate concerning the similarities in doctrine between the Wycliffites and the Reformers, see Richard Rex, The Lollards 115-142).
established in the sixteenth century, “no revolution in the relationships with the written word seems to have taken place” (236). While access to the Bible was available during worship, popular reading was “encouraged only within the framework of catechetics and liturgical texts” (236, my emphasis). Having said that, Gilmont affirms that the daily contact with texts that resulted from a reading culture that “invited [individuals] to read” (237) served as a modest beginning to more reflective and thoughtful private reading.

According to Gilmont’s more balanced history, the Reformation is seen as one step in the evolution of private reading rather than a single, decisive revolutionary moment.

Although far from approaching the formal complexity of monastic lectio, the germ of an interior and introspective reading that reshapes the individual’s ethical life is certainly present in the theology of the early reformers. Tyndale communicates the powerful effects of frequent biblical reading in his Prologue to the New Testament (1534) when he asserts that “the nature of God’s word is, that whosoever read it or hear it... it will begin immediately to make him every day better and better, till he be grown into a perfect man in the knowledge of Christ” (5). Unlike the systematic effort required from practitioners of lectio divina, Tyndale suggests that the effect is involuntary and mechanical. A similar vision of the salutary effects of frequent reading is also present in the Preface to the Coverdale Bible, which implores its readers to “take these words of scripture into thy heart, and be not only an outward hearer, but a doer thereafter, and practice thyself therein.” Diverging from Tyndale, the image of implanting these words into the heart suggests that for Coverdale this is not an automatic response but instead a

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67 The text for Tyndale’s Prologue is taken from David Daniell’s Tyndale’s New Testament: Translated from the Greek by William Tyndale in 1534.
68 The text for Coverdale’s Prologue is taken from Biblia, trans. Miles Coverdale, 1537, STC (2nd ed.) 2064 fol. 8r.
process somewhat akin to lectio. Although slightly closer to the metaphors used to
describe meditative reading, such imagery contrasts markedly with the traditional
representations of lectio as a ladder in which the individual slowly ascends each rung
after having spent much time ruminating on the text.\textsuperscript{69} Given the commitment of these
reformers to scriptura sola, it is hardly surprising that both prologues extol the efficacy of
frequent Bible reading. What is surprising, however, is that in addition to the spiritually
nutritive role of reading, there is an implicit suggestion that such reading is operative.
Even though Protestants envision a more immediate, less intellectualized process than
monastic reading, both Reformation and monastic reading strategies are rooted in the
notion that the reader of pious exempla and hearer of holy admonitions will, over time,
seek to conform his or her own actions to biblical models.

In addition, then, to serving strategic ends in the reformers’s struggle against
ecclesiastical authority, the Bible reading encouraged by these early reformers, in which
scripture is taken and kept in the heart, fosters a deeply private relationship with the text
that is not unlike the relationship that results from more traditional meditative reading.
Frequent reading impresses the text upon the heart, resulting in the individual’s ethical
reformation, which, in turn, allows one to know Christ more intimately. Such a personal
encounter with God through unmediated access to sacred literature has been championed
as a novel and important break with an older, medieval relationship with scripture that
was primarily oral.\textsuperscript{70} Such statements ignore late medieval people’s deep interest not only

\textsuperscript{69} The best example of this metaphor for monastic reading can be found in Guigo II’s \textit{Ladder of Monks}.
\textsuperscript{70} This critical commonplace is rehearsed by Jean-Francois Gilmont in “Protestant Reformations and
Reading” when he claims that medieval Christianity deterred believers from seeking more direct access to
the Bible. He states that ecclesiastical authorities “hardly ever encouraged appropriation of Holy Writ”
(237).
devotional literature but also the ever increasing interest in liturgical ceremony.\textsuperscript{71} Since a more complete comparison between Protestant and monastic reading lies beyond the scope of my study, I wish only to note the fact that both communities not only provided the interpretive tools for devout individuals to cultivate a private, interior relationship with God through vernacular printed material but were also eager to set limits on potential interpretations of texts that diverged from those upheld by their respective communities. What is most important, however, is the fact that analogous reading practices had already been available to pious laypeople within Catholic culture for centuries when the Reformation began in England.

**Four Adaptations of Monastic Literary Culture**

In the late Middle Ages, monastic literary culture was adapted by diverse authors to serve a variety of ends: owing to a shared group of beliefs concerning the efficacy of reading among religious as well as secular authors that strongly resembled those upheld within humanist reading communities, scholars have often judged these individuals critically against standards of humanist thought or overstressed the influence of humanism at the expense of other, similar literary traditions such as those cultivated in the cloister. Setting aside debates over the humanist status of the texts as well as the authors I discuss, my dissertation primarily explores issues related to how the literary and devotional culture of the cloister was adapted in the late Middle Ages to cater to the spiritual aspirations of pious laypeople. Each of my chapters considers this issue in a different literary and

\textsuperscript{71} On the rise of lay interest in the liturgy and it contribution to late medieval literacy, see Katherine Zieman, *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England*. 

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social context; thus, each chapter seeks to connect an author’s attempt to transmit this
culture to a specific audience in order to offer a group of readers a pattern for devout
living, rooted in monastic discipline, that answers to their desire for an increasingly
elaborate and authoritative form of piety. Responding to this demand for structured
patterns of living, Whethamstede, Lydgate, Whitford and More each provide models of
reading as well as examples of disciplined living that, nevertheless, confine their piety
within narrow, orthodox boundaries.

The focus of my dissertation is clustered around the first decades of the fifteenth
and sixteenth centuries. I begin in a strictly Benedictine context by discussing texts by
Whethamstede and Lydgate written in the 1420s. From here, I skip ahead to the first
decades of the next century in my discussions of Whitford and More. My dissertation
straddles the medieval and early modern periods as I move from considering two
monastic authors in the mid fifteenth century, who assert the value of monastic reading,
to discuss a monastic author writing on the eve of the Reformation, who uses the
devotional culture of the cloister to engage in contemporary religious controversies,
before concluding with a lay author outside the monastic establishment, who imagines an
ideal community highly reminiscent of the cloister. Each of these discussions not only
aims to show that monastic ideals were still culturally relevant but also prompt further
reconsideration of the divide between medieval and early modern by way of examining
literary responses to the continued desire of laypeople to gain access to the devotional
culture of the religious. This project also considers whether the aims for which these
authors adapt monastic culture change over time and what factors are responsible for this
change. Are these alterations simply owing to differences in context? Whethamstede and
Lydgate belonged to an order that was facing a great deal of external pressure from the crown to reform itself, and, as I have already noted, monastic lectio was viewed as a powerful antidote for remedying immoral and unorthodox behaviour. Although equally committed to the reformative capacity played by meditative reading, Whitford and More wrote in a period of increasing religious dissent as well as of the rapid consolidation of power in the hands of the monarch. Do these external pressures affect the way that religious culture, by which I mean the meditative reading strategies and the disciplinary structures, is adapted for lay use? To address these issues, my study focuses on the differences of each appropriation and adaptation of this culture and seeks to situate each text within a specific literary and historical framework.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the status of traditional monastic reading practices within early fifteenth-century Benedictine cloisters by focusing on the historiographic poetry and prose of Abbot John Whethamstede. While critics have searched for elements of humanism in his writing for nearly a century, Whethamstede’s vast body of historical as well as encyclopaedic writing is far more typical of contemporary Benedictine literature. My placement of Whethamstede in a monastic rather than humanist tradition is in no way meant to signify that I view him as conventional or backward-looking. Indeed, Whethamstede, unlike the other authors I will discuss, writes for an exclusively religious audience and thus draws attention to the distinctiveness of monastic reading in order to set cloistered readers apart from their secular counterparts. Thus, while he is not concerned with bringing monastic values into secular and vernacular contexts in order to control lay spiritual aspirations, his writing clearly articulates what a monk imagines that meditative reading accomplishes and
further illustrates how control is imagined as an aspect of *lectio divina*. Below, I will discuss three episodes from the abbot’s historical writing which clearly demonstrate his commitment to privileging the moral and aesthetic traditions of his own claustral literary heritage, specifically through the meditative reading programme of *lectio divina*, in order to reinforce boundaries between monk and layperson and to defend monasticism from the force new and dynamic secular traditions.

In the third chapter I will explore how the devotional culture of Benedictine monasticism was adapted for exportation in order to guide and shape the devotional habits of lay readers eager to have some share in the contemplative life. John Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady* partakes of a widespread interest in meditative reading, which, in its aims, functions as a popular counterpart to Whethamstede’s historiographic writing. In this chapter, I will argue that the carefully organized structure of monastic life, particularly the involved programme of monastic reading, plays a crucial role in shaping the Virgin’s daily routines and the formal structure of the poem itself. As well as depicting Mary as a keen practitioner of *lectio divina*, I discuss a range of the text’s distinctive structural characteristics, such as meditative passages on the variety of figural images attributed to the Virgin, the division of the work into short segments in order to facilitate a meditative reading of the text akin to *lectio divina*, as well as a tacit invitation to participate in this reading practice. As well, I situate *The Life of Our Lady* within part of a larger programme, launched in the wake of Archbishop Arundel’s prohibitions on vernacular religious writing, of officially sanctioned devotional literature in England. Widespread contemporary interest in a monastic, contemplative form of life afforded Lydgate with an opportunity to craft a poem that conveyed to vernacular readers some of
the most crucial elements of Benedictine devotional culture: a devotion to meditative reading practices and a firm dedication to the cult of the Virgin Mary. *The Life of Our Lady*, I suggest, may have thus presented Lydgate with an opportunity to demonstrate to those critical of the black monks in general the contribution that the Benedictines were still capable of making to English religious culture.

In the fourth chapter, I move ahead to the sixteenth century to discuss strategies for adapting traditional elements of monastic literary culture within a more expansive programme of monastic renewal already well underway at Syon Abbey. Like his fellow brothers, Richard Whitford wrote for both religious and secular audiences; yet, Whitford’s writing is distinguished by a unique blend of traditional elements of monastic discipline and devotional culture that respond to the appeal of Reformed Christianity. Examining the *Pype or Tonne of the Life of Perfection* and *A Werke for Housholders*, I pay particular attention to the way in which these texts contribute to Whitford’s programme of orthodox renewal as well as to his polemical engagement with Protestantism. I then discuss how the *Pype*’s exploration of the value of claustral discipline is pressed into the service of the brother’s attempts at political intervention against the attacks of Luther on the institution of monasticism as well as against the theology of Tyndale which provided an ideological framework for the royal usurpation of papal authority. Turning to his *Werke*, I will consider how the text re-imagines the secular household closely along monastic lines by instituting a regimen of devout living that continually reinscribes a deeply orthodox piety on every member of the household.

Finally, I will conclude by expanding out beyond the cloister to explore a layman’s appropriation of monastic literary and devotional culture. Although largely
undervalued by the scholarly community, Thomas More’s borrowings from different aspects of religious life which manifest themselves throughout his entire literary career form part of a larger, more thorough attempt to conflate the religious and secular life. Already present in certain biographical details, More’s programmatic efforts to create new patterns of mixed living are most innovatively employed in the Life of Pico and Utopia. In the former, a vernacular translation of Gianfrancesco’s Vita Ioannis Pici Mirandulae, More executes substantial changes that draw attention to Pico’s strong desire to transpose rituals of monastic life onto the day-to-day life of a layperson. More also draws upon the central elements of religious life, I argue, to create his ideal society: in Utopia, More not only looks back to Greco-Roman models of ideal commonwealths but also employs paradigms furnished by the ideal monastic community. Utopia’s debts to monasticism are, I will argue, clearly present in these two communities’ attitudes toward otium and education. Just as monastic devotion encourages a highly cultivated interior spiritual life while at the same time steering that individual away from heterodox readings, so too does the Utopian focus on individual improvement promote a reflective, capable individual while at once setting the limits of his or her intellectual endeavour within narrowly fixed parameters for the sake of civil harmony.

The texts of the four authors I discuss in no way exclude the many others that also fall within this paradigm of exporting different elements of monastic culture to lay readers. Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ as well as The Mirror to Devout People or the Speculum Devotorum are other texts that draw heavily from the devotional culture of the cloister to cater to the spiritual aspirations of a range of intended audiences. Each of the texts in this study adapt monastic reading as well as the
disciplinary structures of the cloister to serve a variety of agendas in a diverse number of contexts. The rigid discipline that these authors require from readers who wish to participate in a richer devotional culture always works to reinforce pieties that are deeply conservative in nature. However, placing these figures together helps to illustrate that Whethamstede, Lydgate, Whitford and More are all participating in a single literary tradition. By distinguishing important threads in Whethamstede’s and Lydgate’s writing that place them on a continuum which includes Whitford and More, we will be able to recognize more easily progressive elements in their writing: by foregrounding Whitford’s and More’s systematic and distinctive appropriations of monastic culture, we will be able to recognize more clearly its continued vitality.
Chapter Two

“The very healthy food of monastic life”:

John Whethamstede, Monastic Identity, and the Legacy of Claustral Reading

The intellectual heritage of the monastery is integral to John Whethamstede’s understanding of literature. A monastic approach to the process of reading, which stresses the text’s role as a catalyst for the moral formation of the monk, can be found throughout Whethamstede’s extensive literary corpus. Yet, when Whethamstede was writing near the end of the Middle Ages, monastic attitudes to the text became increasingly overshadowed by those originating from the university, and neglect of traditional monastic reading practices was further exacerbated by the increasing numbers of monks who were sent to monastic studia at Oxford and Cambridge in order to receive training in theology and canon law. Although Whethamstede was himself a distinguished exemplar of the scholar monks sent to Oxford, the abbot is best known for his profound interest in humanism as well as for his association with Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, and the circle of Italians with whom the duke maintained correspondence. However, Whethamstede’s association with humanism has coloured scholarly attitudes toward the abbot’s literary output, since emphasizing such connections attempts to fit his writing awkwardly into the category of early English humanism, to which it does not belong. In this chapter, I will attempt to overturn this dominant assumption by arguing that Whethamstede’s literary and aesthetic tastes, as well as his attitudes towards reading, strategically blend a distinctively monastic tradition with contemporary rhetorical fashions at Oxford. In doing so, I place Whethamstede at the forefront of contemporary Latin literature and argue that his poetry
and prose consistently demonstrate his attempt to assimilate current trends in secular literature into a monastic context.

Whethamstede is unlike the other authors I examine in that, whereas Lydgate, Whitford and More all export elements of monastic reading from the cloister to the laity in order to accomplish their own pastoral, theological and political aims, the abbot reverses the direction of this cultural transfer. Writing for a community of monks, Whethamstede foregrounds the differences and distinctiveness of monastic reading in order to set cloistered readers apart from their secular counterparts. My discussion will, therefore, begin by examining the distinctive role meditative reading played in late medieval monastic education in order to argue that such ideas strongly inform Whethamstede’s notions of how literature worked. I will then demonstrate the extent to which claustral reading shapes the abbot’s attitudes towards reading by considering an episode from the *Annals of St Albans* that involves the migration of a young monk and consists, in part, of a lengthy reflection on reading, its purposes, and the dangers associated with reading preferences that exclude monastic *lectio*. In this incident, Whethamstede not only records an event but, in the process, fashions a highly literary episode within his register that itself would stress the distinctiveness of monastic reading and emphasize the differences which set the cloistered reader apart from his less disciplined secular counterparts. The highly florid Latin, the dense set of allusions, and the strong moral cast of his poetry and prose, which successfully fuse two seemingly inimical traditions, those of the university and of the monastery, provide examples Whethamstede’s careful appropriation of secular literary traditions. By subsuming such appropriations within an approach the text that is unique to the cloister, Whethamstede’s
blending of traditions, although uneven, is certainly strategic. I will conclude this chapter by arguing that the way in which Whethamstede chooses to appropriate secular literary traditions is not just a reply to cultural pressures but may also represent a deliberate response to political exigencies originating from outside the cloister. Whethamstede’s elevation of monastic reading and, in particular, *lectio divina*—which casts monks in a role both separate from and elevated above the rest of society—may, therefore, be seen as an answer to widespread criticism of the Black Monks, which the abbot confronted directly in 1421 by amending Henry V’s own proposals to renew Benedictine monasticism.

**Whethamstede’s Vision of Saint Bernard and the Salutary Role of Reading**

In 1423, Abbot John Whethamstede of St Albans travelled to Rome to secure a number of privileges for his abbey from Pope Martin V. In Rome, Whethamstede succumbed to a severe case of dysentery; he retired from his meeting with the pontiff and, by evening, was preparing to die. Having given his final instructions to his attendants concerning the disposition of his body as well as for their return to England, Whethamstede turned his head to the wall and slipped out of consciousness. Miraculously, however, the abbot awoke reinvigorated and told his companions how he was visited in a dream by Saint Bernard, who assured him that he would be restored to health if, hereafter, “he loved his books and would cling to them with ardent zeal.”¹ While such somnial visitations were

not unheard of, this episode sits curiously in the record of his journey to Italy since it centres on the reading practices of a man who was known above all for his expansive knowledge and literary talents. As well, while it might strike one as odd to view reading as a curative for dysentery, it is precisely how Whethamstede understood the practice of reading, as well as the intellectual and institutional influences which shaped this understanding, that are crucial to appreciating the abbot’s own literary endeavours.

Born at Wheathampstead in Hertfordshire circa 1393 to Hugh and Margaret Bostock, John began his novitiate at St Albans Abbey, which enjoyed the status of being one of the wealthiest and most cultured religious houses in England, in the first years of the fifteenth century. An exceptionally gifted student, he was chosen to study at Oxford. In 1417 he incepted in theology at an extraordinarily young age—he was approximately 24 years old. When he returned to St Albans that year he was appointed prior, and in just three years Whethamstede was elected abbot. He held this position twice: from 1420 to 1440, stepping down purportedly due to illness, and again from 1451 to his death in 1465. Whethamstede’s rise to prominence within St Albans was, however, matched by his distinguished status as an ecclesiastical diplomat, scholar, letter writer, encyclopaedist, poet, and patron.

Reading Whethamstede, however, as a highly cultivated monastic author has, thus far, been hampered by the nearly unanimous consensus among scholars who attempt to slot his writing into a humanist rubric. In 1941, Roberto Weiss, in his response to W. F. Schirmer, set the tone for the critical reception of Whethamstede by labelling him a type of failed humanist who, despite his exposure to a variety of contemporary writing from

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2 One of Whethamstede’s predecessors, Abbot Thomas de la Mare, had suffered a similar illness while in Rome seventy-three years earlier and, like Whethamstede, credited a visitation from St Alban in a dream for his miraculous recovery. For a further account, see the *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani* 2: 385.
Italy and his great “diligence and zeal” (38), “remained fundamentally unaffected by modern influence.”³ Weiss’s unstated bias, which conflates humanism with the modern and forecloses any possibility that there might have been other ways of being modern in the fifteenth century, is echoed by later critics, such as E. F. Jacob and Antonia Gransden,⁴ who share similar views. David Carlson has, more recently, attempted to rehabilitate the abbot’s poetry. Yet he too participates in this debate over Whethamstede’s humanist status by claiming that “the confused nature” of his poetry is the result of an attempt to collapse competing and antagonistic literary traditions: scholasticism and humanism. Carlson characterizes these humanist elements within Whethamstede’s poetry as an attempt to “participate in the more thoroughgoing classical scholarship associated with the humanist movement... and in that movement’s efforts to apply classical canons to current circumstances.”⁵ Against these scholars, I suggest that such arguments, which attempt to cast the abbot as either an early humanist or a failed humanist, only serve to hinder the possibility of a more nuanced understanding of the abbot’s literary endeavours.

Part of the problem is that while the term “humanist” does possess a specific definition when used in a late medieval or early modern literary context, it is used by some simply to stand in for a set of attractive and progressive attributes. These critics assume that a humanist project is latent within larger literary concerns that would, at a later date, be labelled humanist, such as a dedication to the study of classical texts as a stylistic standard for Latin as well as a commitment to literature as a means of providing

³ Weiss 31. Here, Weiss is responding to Schirmer’s claim that Whethamstede is a type of proto-humanist who attempted to “garb the literary activity of the convent in the formal, aesthetic spirit of Italian humanism” (82); see further, Schirmer 82-98.
⁴ See Jacob 192 Gransden 385-86.
intellectual discipline and moral standards. Although these concerns are demonstrated throughout Whethamstede’s corpus, such attempts at classification gloss over significant aspects of the abbot’s literary agenda that do not fit the humanist mould, such as consistent subordination of secular texts to those texts traditionally elevated within the cloister as well as a dedication to a distinctly monastic approach to reading. Whethamstede’s attitudes towards literature, hitherto mistaken as humanist, more properly belong to the literary heritage of Benedictine monasticism than to a fledgling humanist culture only recently arrived in England.

An important point of departure for reconsidering Whethamstede’s assimilation of secular literary traditions to a monastic context is the unique educational programme he underwent first at St Albans and later at Oxford. Rather than stressing Whethamstede’s association with Humphrey, duke of Gloucester and the circle of Italians with whom he maintained a correspondence, my discussion of Whethamstede’s literary career will begin by situating him within the intellectual and institutional context of late medieval monasticism. A more complete understanding of the hybridized pedagogical programme adopted by the Benedictines, which had been repeatedly promulgated in the chapters of the Black Monks and in papal bulls for nearly a century by the time Whethamstede professed at St Albans, is thus especially crucial for making sense of the abbot’s literary aims.
“vacet lectioni”: Monastic formation and the efficacy of meditative reading

The curative role that is tacitly ascribed to loving books and ardently studying them represents a distinctively monastic approach to the text. While secular writers also identify reading as a remedy for some form of mental or emotional perturbation—Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes* is an excellent example⁶—the aims of monastic reading are far more ambitious. The meditative reading performed in the cloister aspires to reform completely the ethical life of the brother. That Whethamstede alludes to this latter, claustral reading practice in his dream when he is admonished to read in order to cure his dysentery is suggested by the fact that it is Bernard of Clairvaux who visits the abbot at the point of death. To his admirers, Bernard seemed to personify the monastic ideal, since throughout his sermons and letters he conveyed his conviction that the monastic vocation was the optimum way to follow Christ. This opinion can be seen, for example, in his maintaining the traditional view that those who followed Benedict’s *Rule* were closest to replicating a model of apostolic life. He wrote that the monks had, just as the Apostles before them, “left all and gathered together in the school of the Saviour,” and, as a result, “are to some degree made their peers by [their] practice.”⁷ Beyond this popular view of the saint as a model of monastic living, Bernard’s significance to Whethamstede’s vision most likely resides in his widespread reputation as a defender of monastic education against the growing threat posed by the university to the intellectual pre-eminence of the

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⁶ In the Prologue of the *Regiment*, the narrator’s interlocutor ascribes similar benefits to reading as an aid to assist one in withdrawing “from follie sooner... [t]han he that... hath no maner letterure” (157-160). In addition to the general benefits of literacy touched on in Hoccleve’s poem, which also include greater discretion and a better ability to understand others (see further 150-160), monastic reading is a far more comprehensive programme with a specific set of aims.

religious orders. To combat the encroachment of the university onto the terrain of the cloister, Bernard adopted—following Benedict, who described the cloister as a “school for the service of God” (RB Prol. 165)—the language of education to describe monastic life. As Stephan Ferruolo points out, Bernard fashioned a vocabulary that “set the cloister and the schools up as mirror images” (55), citing Bernard’s letters to Master Henry Murdach and to a young student who reneged on his vow to enter Cîteaux as examples.

In the former letter, Bernard speaks of the cloister as a “school of piety” and promises the master that he will find greater learning if he leaves the schools for the monastery.8 To the young monk, Bernard emphasises the superiority of the cloister as a place to learn as well as live, since Christ himself will serve as his instructor.9 Equally important was Bernard’s commitment to the monastic programme of contemplative reading, which while never explicitly broached, is clearly imbedded in the form and content of his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Not only does the digressive structure of this massive exegetical work illustrate what Jean Leclercq calls “the phenomenon of reminiscence”—verbal echoes that evoke other quotations—fostered by monastic meditative practices (*Love of Learning*, 73-5), but it also addresses the importance of sacred reading. This is especially clear in *Sermon 23*, a lengthy meditation that relates the rooms in which the bridegroom has invited his bride to, among other things, the various steps in the monastic reading programme: “Let the garden, then, represent the plain, unadorned, historical sense of Scripture [which corresponds to *lectio*], the storeroom its moral sense [which corresponds to *meditatio*], and the bedroom the mystery of divine contemplation”

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8 St Bernard, Epistle 106, *PL* 182, 242A, quoted in Ferruolo 55.
9 St Bernard, Epistle 412, *PL* 182, 621D, quoted in Ferruolo 55.
It was at his final stage, upon finally encountering God, or catching “sight of the King” (23.40), that the monk was to effect the “interior transformation of the soul” — the desired outcome of lectio divina. While such (scarcely) oblique allusions to monastic reading may be found elsewhere in his massive corpus, this sermon is especially useful for explaining just why Bernard is chosen to admonish the abbot on the salutary nature of reading at the point of death.

The meditative reading practices that are so central to Bernard’s own understanding of how one should approach sacred texts seem to be what the saint demands of Whethamstede during his dream. The “ardent zeal” [ardenti studio] (Annales 1: 151) with which Whethamstede is to love his books is reminiscent of Bernard’s affirmation in Sermon 23 that the one to arrive first to the rooms of the king — glossed as the different stages in the monastic reading process — is “the one whose love is more ardent” [quae amat ardentius] (23.1; PL 183, 884 B). In both texts, we see that the burning love for books and reading functions as a cause for individual re-formation. In Bernard’s sermon, we are walked through the rooms of the king and told of the various merits needed to enter the bedroom, or the contemplation of God; however, in Whethamstede’s register, the transformative effects of monastic reading are given a more concrete shape in the abbot’s physical recovery. In other words, Whethamstede also provides an example of how reading may serve as a tool for self-change — both in terms of the interior ethical and exterior physiological re-formation of the subject. Of course,

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10 The English text of Bernard’s sermons is taken from volume 3 of The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs II. All references are to the sermon and paragraph number in this edition. My discussion is greatly indebted to the readings of this sermon by Mary Agnes Edsall in her unpublished dissertation “Reading Like a Monk: Lectio Divina, Religious Literature, and Lay Devotion,” and Brian Stock’s in The Implications of Literacy 435-38. Other valuable discussions of Bernard’s view on the efficacy of monastic reading may be found in P. Dumontier, esp. 146ff., and G. R. Evans 46-49.
11 On Bernard’s view of the necessity for an interior transformation of the monk that is required to encounter God, see Gilson 93-94.
this idea of the physical as well as ethical change, which concretizes the belief in the (ethically) salubrious effects of monastic reading, also draws upon Bernardine spirituality. Both Brian Stock and Stephen Jaeger have carefully noted how, for Bernard, meditation on sacred texts not only culminated in the reformation of the monk’s actions but also how the disciplined control of the body was the product of a pure conscience initiated by the inward cultivation of ethical virtue attained through contemplation (Stock, *Implications of Literacy* 405-06; Jaeger 269-71).

The salutary effects of *lectio divina* that inform Whethamstede’s vision and subsequent recovery are not only far from uncommon in the later Benedictine literature but also quite pervasive in the abbot’s own writing and administration of his office. While the *Rule* had described the reading of Scripture as a type of *medicamina* (*RB* 28.225), the curative role reading might play in restoring wayward monks continued to be emphasised in the late Middle Ages. The record of Bishop William Alnwick’s visitation to Bardney Abbey in 1437 bears witness to the perseverance of the Benedictine commitment to meditative reading—and a conviction in its benefits—in the prescription of reading from the Psalter as a punishment of minor infractions of the *Rule*.12 Such applications of reading as a corrective are also present in the *Annals of St Albans* where Whethamstede himself applies similar strategies to reform less disciplined priories under the Abbey’s jurisdiction.

Whethamstede’s participation in a monastic tradition that emphasised the salutary effects of meditative reading is further confirmed in his prescription of *lectio divina* when admonishing the brothers at Redbourn to reform their lax observances of the *Rule*.

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12 A. H. Thompson, ed., *Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln* 2.1: 22. This remedy was used again in a subsequent visitation to Bardney in 1444; See page 32 in the same volume.
Inspired by a desire to honour St Amphibalus, whose shrine was located at Redbourn and who is credited for converting St Alban, Whethamstede, in the summer of 1439, published six ordinances that attempted to rehabilitate the daughter-house by forcing the brothers to submit to monastic standards of the late Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{13} While five of the ordinances concern the stricter observances of communal life, the last chapter, which addresses the avoidance of idleness, prescribes reading as a curative for the laxness at Redbourn. In order to restore the priory to a place of “reputable recreation” (\textit{Annales} 2: 210), the purpose for which it was intended as a house of retreat for the Abbey, Whethamstede hopes even to transform it into a place of “virtuous training and of studious conversation” (\textit{Annales} 2: 210). In order to achieve this task, the abbot urges the monks “to make themselves free for reading” [\textit{vacet... lectioni}] so that they “may banish idleness” (\textit{Annales} 2: 210) from their day. Indeed, Whethamstede’s belief in the benefits of monastic reading is indicated by his use of the specialized phrase \textit{vacare lectioni} to describe the action the monks perform when encountering the text. The verb \textit{vacare} is a term that defined the action of a Christian monk.\textsuperscript{14} In classical Latin, \textit{vacare} means “to have been set or to become free,” but from the period of the Patristics onward, Christian authors used the word to denote the activity of a monk—the giving over of oneself over to something, such as reading and other spiritual exercises. We can see such usage of this phrase in, for example, such early monastic writings as the \textit{Vita Patrum} and the \textit{Historia}

\textsuperscript{13} By the end of the Middle Ages there had been a general loosening of discipline in the older religious orders. Such laxity among the Benedictines had become, by the early fifteenth century, so prevalent that in 1421 Henry V convened a general chapter of the black monks at Westminster in order to curb the further relaxation of monastic discipline among the Benedictines. See David Knowles, \textit{The Religious Orders in England} 2: 166-84.

\textsuperscript{14} The following discussion of the verb \textit{vacare} paraphrases material from Jean Leclercq, \textit{Otia monastica: Études sur le vocabulaire de contemplation au moyen Age} 42-49, and Ivan Illich’s description of \textit{otia monastica} in \textit{In the Vineyard of the Text} 61-65.
monachorum in Aegypto. A similar usage of the verb also appears in the Rule of St Benedict. Occasionally, as Leclercq notes, the verb is used simply to refer to one’s devoting himself to an activity, such as idle banter (“fabulis vacet,” RB 43. 244) or simply idleness (“vacat otio,” RB 48. 250). However, this verb is employed most often in conjunction with the action of reading to denote lectio divina (Leclercq, Otia monastica, 49). In delineating the daily routine of the monks, Benedict repeatedly deploys the constructions “lectioni vacent” (RB 48, 4, 10, 22), “vacent lectionibus suis” (RB 48, 13, 14), and “vacent fratres lectioni” (RB 48, 17) to describe the sacred reading that the brothers are to engage in.

That Whethamstede has this traditional programme of monastic reading in mind when he deploys the phrase lectioni vacet in his ordinances for Redbourn Cell is suggested by the abbot’s application of lectio to “exclude idleness, and to cultivate virtue” (Annales 2: 210). While such notions are entirely consonant with Benedict’s teaching in the Rule, which prescribes meditative reading as a way of evading idleness—the enemy of the soul—Whethamstede’s recommendation for a deeper engagement with monastic reading is fully in keeping with attempts by other Benedictines in the later Middle Ages to return to more traditional intellectual and institutional practices such as lectio divina. Evidence for this return to older forms of devotional reading can be found scattered throughout capitular statues of the English Benedictines. As early as the mid-thirteenth century, at the general chapter held at Southwark in 1249, a renewed emphasis

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15 Leclercq provides an invaluable collection of instances of the use of vacare in early monastic writing in Otia monastica, 48-49. Leclercq cites seven examples Benedict’s Rule alone taken from chapter 48 in verses 4, 10, 13, 14, 17 and 22. Other examples are taken from Augustine, Ruffinus, and Gregory (see especially 49).

16 Chapter 48 of the Rule of St Benedict, which contains the lengthiest discussion of monastic reading within the text, begins famously with the statement, “Idleness is the enemy of the soul” (48. 249).
on postprandial meditative reading is urged, and not long after, at the Evesham general chapter in 1255, the canons stress that studious attention be paid to “sacred reading and meditation.” Attempts to rehabilitate the proper use of monastic *otium*, the studious repose of the monk that enables him to engage in meditative reading, occurred repeatedly in subsequent chapters of the Black Monks. What this suggests, then, is that Whethamstede’s directives, as abbot of St Albans, are entirely consonant with this movement in Benedictine monasticism which continued throughout the late Middle Ages that sought to return to more distinctly monastic traditions to reform the brothers.

The different reading methodologies that were fostered in the university were, in many ways, inimical to those practiced within the cloister. As Leclercq figuratively puts it, the difference in the orientation of monastic and scholastic reading, which entailed a corresponding reorientation in the predominance of certain disciplines, constitutes an accentual shift: “the accent is no longer placed on grammar, the *littera*, but on logic” (*Love of Learning*, 200). This shift in emphasis from grammar to logic entailed a radically different approach to the text. As Martin Irvine points out, *grammatica* designated a specific methodology which governed the acquisition of literacy and the scholarly study of Latin literature by setting out instructions for reading and interpreting texts. Monastic communities inherited this model from antiquity. However, with the

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18 Here, the brothers are urged to “attend studiously to sacred reading, meditation and to other such exercises of this type” (Pantin, *Documents* 1: 55).
19 Similar attempts to urge monks to avoid idleness through more traditional and bookish activities of studying, reading and writing books as well as correcting and illuminating them (“studendo, legendo, liberosque scribendo, corrigendo, illuminando”) are promulgated in the provincial chapter of 1343 and again in the “Articles of Inquiry” for a visitation, published after 1365. See Pantin, *Documents* 2: 50-51 and 85, respectively.
20 Irvine 4-5. Discussing the literary division of *grammatica*, Irvine notes that this facet of the discipline contained four main methodological divisions: “lectio, the principles for reading a text aloud from the manuscript; *enarratio*, exposition of content and the principles for interpretation, including the analysis of
The advent of the universities' grammatical culture began to change outside the cloister. Within the university, *grammatica* was redefined: as Irvine notes, “[t]he object language, Latin, was retained but its systematic description became separated from the activity of interpreting texts” (464). While the monastic methodology which was based on a more traditional notion of *grammatica* concentrated upon a poetic and literary understanding of the text and was practised primarily for the edification of the individual monk, the scholastic method centred on dialectic and a logical understanding of texts that strove for the utmost clarity and was chiefly concerned with the acquisition of new knowledge.  

Although himself a graduate of Oxford, Whethamstede remained committed to the moral efficacy of meditative reading, which continued to exist, as the capitular canons bear witness, as an integral part of Benedictine intellectual culture. In the preceding section, I have argued for the centrality of monasticism’s literary heritage to the abbot’s formation as an author of a diverse body of literature. The curative role of reading exemplified in Whethamstede’s dream of St Bernard as well as its use by him as a remedy for the laxity which had taken hold at Redbourn Priory illustrate two very different ways in which the abbot exhibits his commitment to traditional reading practices of the cloister. Of course, this rediscovery of traditional monastic *lectio* was not unique to Whethamstede. At St Albans, the popularity of patristic and early medieval biblical commentators, the numerous collections of prayers and meditations that survive, as well as the brothers’ tendency to add prayers and meditations to the margins of books all attest

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figurative language; *emendatio*, the rules for establishing textual authenticity and linguistic correctness; and *iudicium*, criticism or evaluations of writings (4).

21 Leclercq also cites a number of medieval authors who also draw similar distinctions between monastic and scholastic reading methodologies, including St Bernard of Clairvaux, Rupert of Deutz, Peter of Celle, and Peter Damian; see Leclercq, *The Love of Learning* 198-99. For a useful discussion of how *lectio scholastica*, the reading programme of the schoolmen, competed against the older monastic practices of *lectio divina* see Ivan Illich, “Lectio Divina” 19-35.
to the continued observation of lectio divina.\textsuperscript{22} What I wish to suggest is that Whethamstede’s monastic heritage played a decisive role in shaping his understanding of literature. More specifically, these phenomena are important, I argue, since claustral reading may have made him receptive to humanist ideas originating from Italy which thus resulted in his own misappellation as a humanist, as both reading cultures were based on the formative role of literature, favoured periods of studious repose and were also rooted in a classical model of textual interpretation. Nevertheless, any discussion of Whethamstede’s literary aspirations must also take into consideration his long association with the university. His lengthy stay at Oxford, as well as his sustained dedication to elevating the prestige of Gloucester College and to increasing the number of monks from the abbey sent to study there, clearly point to the high esteem in which he held university training. Perhaps the most visible imprint that the university left on Whethamstede may be seen in his desire to transpose the rhetorical and poetic tastes of Oxford to the monastery. And while his dedication to traditional monastic reading methodologies clearly shows through in the registers of his two abbacies, Whethamstede’s dual position as a monk and as a scholastic, a position which he held in common with many of the most intellectually gifted Benedictines in the later Middle Ages, is crucial for understanding his openness to certain elements of secular culture as well as his desire to domesticate it.

\textsuperscript{22} James G. Clark provides an excellent discussion of the survival of monastic lectio at St Albans at the beginning of the fifteenth century in \textit{A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans: Thomas Walsingham and his Circle c. 1350-1440} 134-40.
Learning after the Greatest Teacher: Redefining Benedictine pedagogy in the wake of *Summi Magistri*

While many of Whethamstede’s views concerning reading were shaped by the monastic tradition to which he belonged, the abbot of St Albans also owed significant intellectual debts to university culture. Not long after his acceptance into the Benedictine Order, Whethamstede was sent to Gloucester Hall, and, due to his aptitude, was appointed *prior studentium*, a position equivalent to warden of the college, for the years 1414 to 1417—the year in which he received his doctorate in theology. Even after returning to St Albans, Whethamstede maintained his ties with the university by donating a number of books to the college and by financing the construction of a college library, which was completed c. 1440. Most important for this discussion, however, is the role his experiences at Gloucester played in shaping his literary tastes. Some indication of how great this role was may be found in his description, later in life, of the atmosphere of the monastic college as a type of paradise for poets. Cataloguing Whethamstede’s literary endeavours, James Clark cites the abbot’s recollection of Gloucester almost forty years later as a “a Cabalinian fount which gushing forth in the midst of Oxford, makes it unexpectedly rich in poets [and where] one joins with the Muses in the singing of extraordinary melodies.”

Originally established to combat the threat posed by universities to the intellectual pre-eminence of monastic culture as well as by the arrival in the 1220s of the Dominican

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23 For a thorough yet concise history of Gloucester College, see James Campbell 37-47.  
24 See Clark, “University Monks in Late Medieval England” 68. The original text reads: “eoque magis cogimur admirari, quod licet nunquam juxta fontem Caballinum, in medio Oxoniarum scaturientem, somnum ceperas, ut ita repente poeta prodires... ut sic scires cum Musis singulis in singulis musaicis singulariter decantare” (*Registrum Abbatis Johannis Whethamstede* 1: 313-14).
and the Franciscan Orders into England, Gloucester College had, by the early fifteenth century, become a centre for the intellectual and literary revival of the Benedictine Order in the British Isles. This attempt at renewal was largely the result of Pope Benedict XII’s bull *Summi magistri*, which attempted, in 1336, to reform the oldest of the monastic orders. In an effort to correct the most serious deviations from communal life, Benedict’s legislation aimed to restructure the administration of the houses, restrain the laxity of monastic discipline, and, most significantly, overhaul the programme of monastic studies.25

However, although this document targeted these three specific areas in order to check the increasing laxity among the Black Monks, the language of the document itself foregrounds the reformation of monastic studies. The significant weight these constitutions placed upon pedagogy and the importance to monasticism of study is signalled in the title of the bull, *Summi Magistri*, which, following common practice, is taken from the opening words of Benedict’s proemium:

> The authority of the greatest teacher has mercifully established me, although undeserving, in the chair of the apostolic master, so that I may by no means be in charge, but may benefit equally through works and through example… so that I may procure the benefits of salvation for myself and for others.26

Invoking the authority of Christ, the *summus Magister*, who is referred to throughout the Gospels as a teacher and whose followers are known as students or *discipuli*, Benedict deploys language of instruction in order to assert his jurisdiction over the Benedictines,  

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25 For an overview of Benedict XII’s Constitutions as well as their influence in England, see Peter McDonald, “The Papacy and Monastic Observance in the Later Middle Ages: The Benedictina in England.”

26 “Summi magistri dignatio nos, quanquam immeritos, misericorditer in apostici magisterii cathedra collocavit, ut nedom praesimus, sed prosimus operibus partier et exemplis… ut nobis et alis salutis commoda procuremus” (*Concilia* 2: 588). The Latin text for *Summi Magistri* is taken from *Concilia magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae AD 446-1717*. All references are to this edition and all translations are my own.
an order which had hitherto resisted any encroachment upon the autonomy of their order. Asserting that he has been entrusted with magisterial authority over his flock, Benedict XII proceeds to set out his plan to revamp the current programme of studies at Benedictine houses. At the centre of the pope’s plans for restructuring Benedictine education is the imposition of two requirements: first, that each house supply a master to teach young monks grammar, logic, and philosophy, which, in practical terms, amounted to a rudimentary grounding in the arts of the *trivium* (the arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic) as well as some instructional aids for reading the Bible and the *Rule* of the Benedictine order, and, second, that one out of every twenty monks be sent, with an adequate pension, to the university. While these two facets of Benedict’s educational reforms have generated most of the critical discussion of *Summi magistri*, the concern to maintain the strength of traditional monastic pedagogy is also clearly present in the document.

Devoted exclusively to the education of the monk within the cloister, chapter 12 outlines a course of study that seeks both to elevate and restore the intellectual culture of the monastery while at the same time encourage a return to traditional monastic reading practices. Instructions are given for each monk to be schooled in the “primitive sciences” (*Concilia* 594), which included grammar, logic and philosophy. While Benedict’s constitutions flatly acknowledge the practical purpose these reforms were intended to have, such as providing personnel to fill administrative and bureaucratic gaps (see *Concilia* 2: 586), they also, significantly, celebrate traditional monastic reading. This sentiment is made explicit in the first words of the chapter “On Studies”:

\[27\] For a discussion of just what texts were to be read by novices under the rubric of “grammar, logic and philosophy,” see Joan Greatrex, “The Scope of Learning within the Cloisters of the English Cathedral Priories in the Later Middle Ages” 44-8.
Because, in truth, the pearl of knowledge is acquired through the skill of reading, and is attained more intimately through the study of the sacred page for a knowledge of divine excellence, and a more rational soul is produced through an acknowledgement of human law, and is more certainly fashioned for justice... by instructing monks in the primitive sciences in the monastery, in which they live, holding fast to high things, I want and I prescribe that [these constitutions] be firmly observed.\(^\text{28}\)

The study of the sacred page, which in a monastic context would entail *lectio divina* (Illich, “Lectio Divina” 20-21), that the constitutions urge each monk to engage in offsets the more pervasive sentiment within the document to renovate the programme of monastic studies; in other words, a return to monasticism’s traditional educational programme balances a desire to embrace new learning originating from outside the cloister. More importantly, this passage also sets out what was beginning, and what would become, standard in monastic studies—the blending of monastic and scholastic pedagogical practices. Initially asserting the role of reading as the gateway to knowledge, this chapter proceeds to emphasise the continued necessity of traditional monastic reading practices for attaining divine excellence before going on to balance this type of understanding with a more worldly knowledge of “human law,” which, as the document later specifies, is acquired through an understanding of canon law. In other words, this segment of “On Studies” in Benedict’s constitutions legally formalizes a process which had begun almost a century earlier in the English provinces when a handful of Benedictine houses founded cells at Oxford. Although this programme of pedagogical hybridity, now officially enshrined by the Papacy, met with mixed enthusiasm and was

\(^{28}\) “Quia vero per exercitium lectionis adquiritur scientiae margarita, et per studium sacrae paginæ ad cognitionem excellentiae divinae familiarius pervenitur, ac per agnitionem humani juris animus rationabilior efficitur, et ad justitiam certius informatur... de monachis in scientiis primitivis instruendis infra monasteria, quibus degunt, editæ inhaerentes, illam volumes et præcipimus firmiter observari” (*Concilia* 2: 594).
only formally adopted by the wealthiest houses in England, its effect on the intellectual culture and literary tastes of Benedictine monasticism would be far-reaching.

By Whethamstede’s time, the hostility of the Black Monks towards scholastic curricula common in the twelfth century had all but disappeared. St Albans’ own *Annales* provides a striking example of just how intertwined these two institutions had become. In a short work dating from c. 1430, an anonymous author praises the contributions of his order to the faith and attributes to it the responsibility for founding the universities at Paris and Oxford (See *Annales* 1: 423). As proof of this claim, the author notes that Oxford and Cambridge still require the student to wear a “black habit” (*Annales* 1: 423) upon incepting as Master of Arts, a tradition that “pays reverence to monks for their institution, so that they may conform themselves to them in the colour of their habit” (*Annales* 1: 423). While there is no evidence to support such claims, they do offer a glimpse of how students coming from the cloister may have perceived the university. Here, the institutional otherness of the university, which was so vehemently emphasised in previous centuries by monks such as Bernard, has given way to a different conceptualization that sees the schools rather as an extension of the cloister. The blending of university culture with the intellectual traditions of Benedictine monasticism, which can, for example, be noted in the expansion of claustral libraries in the period, is especially noticeable at Gloucester College in the early fifteenth century.

At the time that Whethamstede was attending Gloucester College, almost a century after the promulgation of *Summi magistri* made university attendance mandatory

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29 See, for example, Coates 81-83. On an even more precise scale, Aidan Bellenger’s reading of the contents from the dictionary within the “Downside medulla” notes the “wide vocabulary and influences which impinged on claustral education” and attributes this trend to the reform of the syllabus of monastic education engineered by *Summi magistri* (38). See Bellenger 35-40.
for a small portion of monks in every house in the province, this Benedictine studium was the site on which the majority of England’s Black Monks obtained a university education. While there are still many uncertainties concerning what was taught and what was read at Oxford’s Benedictine colleges, surviving catalogues and books offer some clues as to what many of the students were reading there who were not pursuing doctoral degrees in canon law or theology. A consideration of the deep interest that the monks developed for rhetoric, particularly dictamen, provides an example of just how porous the boundaries were that separated monk and clerk.  

Although separated from the secular clerical community at Oxford by the demands of religious life, which kept the monk scholars almost permanently out of sync with the regular academic year (Clark, “University Monks” 58), the brothers participated in broader intellectual trends that extended throughout the university through their interest in rhetoric.

The rhetorical studies which the monks engaged in at Gloucester College served a variety of practical ends, such as training for an obedientiary, or a monastic official, within the bureaucracy of the abbey, as well as offering the monks an outlet to channel their literary interests. Such a rhetorical education was crucial to a monk since it prepared him for the variety of administrative positions within his house and better enabled him to fulfil his pastoral obligation of preaching. The demand for monks with an ability to preach extends back to Summi magistri and was keenly felt at St Albans. One of Whethamstede’s first acts to remedy the deficiency of preachers in the pulpit during his second abbacy was to increase the number of monks sent to the university (Registrum 1: 24-5). While at the college, monks in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries

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30 Discussions of the presence of a rhetorical tradition at Oxford before the 1431 statute include Weisheipl, Schoeck, Ward.
would have been exposed to a range of texts as well as to poetic and rhetorical tastes which, while extremely popular at late medieval Oxford, differed from a more traditional monastic aesthetic.

The meticulous research that James Clark has done to reconstruct the range of studies monks were engaged in at the College and to identify intellectual trends and literary interests cultivated at Oxford in the later Middle Ages offers valuable insights into how deeply rhetorical studies shaped the literary tastes of the monks at Gloucester.31 Especially significant is Clark’s observation that many of the monks utilized their rhetorical training and study of *dictamen* not only for practical ends but also as “the basis for a deeper understanding of poetry and prose, and the use of colour, metre, and the cursus” (“University Monks” 65). On the basis of extant library catalogues, Clark notes the “sizeable collections” (“University Monks” 65) of rhetorical treatises such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova* and Richard Bury’s *Philobiblon* as well as the significant range of Latin literature which included works by Cicero, Lucan, Sallust, Ovid and Virgil (“University Monks” 66-67). This movement, which, intentionally or not, worked to restore the primary arts of the *trivium*, namely grammar and rhetoric at the university, had a considerable impact on scholars such as Whethamstede, who incorporated many of the attitudes toward and trends in literary study at the college into a deeply monastic approach to literature.

While there can be no certain knowledge of the full extent of the scholarly and literary activities of the monks at Gloucester, enough work has been done on manuscripts of students to allow some conclusions to be drawn about the literary culture at Gloucester.

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31 The following discussion of the literary interests that flourished at Gloucester owes much to Clark’s in “University Monks in Late Medieval England” 56-71.
College as well as its role in shaping Whethamstede’s own aesthetic sensibilities. As Roberto Weiss pointed out some time ago, the “euphuistic” Latin that Whethamstede wrote, which he characterized as “obscurity and involution of style, extravagance and over-elaboration in imagery and metaphor, [and] an obvious painstaking care in diction” (28), was characteristic of Anglo-Latin in the early fifteenth century. More importantly, it was also a result of the force exerted by *dictamen*, which placed such weight on diction, and the rhetorical treatises of such theorists as Geoffrey Vinsauf and Matthew of Vendôme, whose stress on elaboration and ornamentation occupied a central role in poetic composition (29). Although Weiss does not specifically locate the sites where such a “baroque” (29) literary aesthetic was cultivated, he does note its source in epistolography, which points back to the training monks received at the university.32 E. F. Jacob, who employed the phrase *verborum florida venustas*, the flowery beauty of words, to characterize this exuberant poetic style of Latin, links it more closely to the university. Citing numerous letters that reflect or comment directly on the rhetorical tastes currently in fashion at Oxford, Jacob notes the dominant tendency toward overly ornate Latin, which Whethamstede certainly embraced. In a letter admonishing a younger friend to study rhetoric but eschew its exuberant use, one student succinctly enumerates a number of popular tropes used by students at Oxford that characterize the abbot’s literary aesthetic:

Avoid obscure words which weaken the senses of the hearers, and use terms easily understood by the human intelligence. . . . . Take care, secondly, that your

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32 Although Oxford excluded the teaching of *dictamen* from official curricula, extant evidence indicates that the monks’ early training at the university included instruction in the *ars dictaminis*. On the teaching of dictamen at Oxford in the late Middle Ages, see R. J. Schoeck, “On Rhetoric in Fourteenth-Century Oxford,” and John O. Ward, “Rhetoric in the Faculty of Arts at the Universities of Paris and Oxford in the Middle Ages: A Summary of the Evidence.”
exhortations and those preliminaries which we call ‘never-ending’ do not proceed eternally in a circle and lead to no conclusion. Why give a picture of the heavens and complain that you are in a plight? And if you are asking for money, what right have you to begin with the Incarnation of the Word? Beware, thirdly, lest the literal history of Scripture with which you resolve to conclude your thought, applies to the material only in a mystical sense.33

The three abuses of obscure language, unending periods and misuse of biblical allusion which this student warns against, are all present in abundance in Whethamstede’s writing. Evidently Whethamstede’s rhetorical exuberance was shared by his fellow students at the university where he most likely encountered and refined such figures and tropes. Such language was not restricted to the student community, but was used by university officials as well: Jacob takes the title of his article, *verborum florida venustas*, from a phrase used by a contemporary to describe Chancellor Robert Gilbert’s language at the Southern Convocation in 1417. The consciously involved Latin of the abbot’s writing thus seems to partake more of contemporary literary tastes at Gloucester College than of the smattering of humanist literature he encountered later in life.

While the erudite style that Whethamstede cultivated at Gloucester is most striking in his poetry, his epistles provide excellent examples of his elaborate language and convoluted syntax. Whethamstede’s letter to a learned Venetian, whom he encountered on the road to Florence, clearly manifests the abbot’s predilection for florid prose. In his letter to the Venetian, Whethamstede describes his great disappointment at not having become better acquainted with the stranger, who gave him a letter of introduction to a physician in the city and whom the physician would later praise as “the most literate of men, subtle in eloquence and knowledgeable in unique learning” (*Annales*

33 Letter quoted in Jacob, “*Verborum florida venustas,*” 201-02. The letter itself may be found in All Souls Coll. MS. 182, fo. 73.
The prose of the abbot’s letter offers a typical example of how he consistently adorned his words with extravagant expressions and, at times, metaphors so inflated that they stand on the brink of hyperbole. Whethamstede’s salutation to the anonymous Venetian contains both of these features:

The fountain of Rhetoric gushing over in Venice, and advancing from the mouth of eloquence. I express new grief in the heart, and I violently discharge fresh sighs from my deepest breast, whenever I recall to the sharpness of memory, how while on the road toward Siena I had, albeit not another Christ rising again, but the orator Cicero speaking to me. My eyes were held by the veil of ignorance, and the grace of recognizing him was not given.

The occasion to which this episode in the *Annales* alludes to is the journey of the disciples to Emmaus, an episode from Luke’s Gospel which focuses on two disciples’ encounter with the risen Christ, whom they do not immediately recognize, and his subsequent explication of biblical texts for them (See Luke 24:13). Here, we can locate various instances of Whethamstede’s attention to polished words and the colour of expression that, while they may appear preposterous, do, in fact, tell us a great deal about the abbot’s literary assumptions.

Although the description of the Venetian as a font of rhetorical skill is simply following contemporary canons of rhetorical practice—which stipulate that the most ornate language that one can find ought to be applied to each thought in a discourse

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34 “Fons Rhetoricae in Venetiis scaturiens, ex ore eloquentiaeque procedens. – Novas in corde tristitias agimus, recentiae ab imis pectore suspiria eructamus, quotiens ad aciem memoriae recolligimus, quomodo dum in itinere versus Senas resurgentem etsi non Christum alterum, tamen habuimus alloquentem nobis oratorem Tullium, oculi nostri tenebantur velamine ignorantiae, nec dabatur gratia agnoscenti eum” (*Annales* 1: 136).

35 Attention to polished words (*verba polita*) and the colour of expression (*dicendi color*), or rhetorical figures, are among the most important facets of rhetorical elegance in medieval rhetorical theory. For example, Matthew of Vendôme devotes the whole of Book 2 in his *Ars versificatoria* to explaining their necessity in constructing a line of verse.
composed in the high style\textsuperscript{36}—Whethamstede’s description of his initial encounter with the stranger must not be overlooked. The cluster of metaphors the abbot deploys to frame his encounter with the stranger while travelling to Florence reflect how Whethamstede yoked together seemingly incommensurable ideas, as he does when fusing literary expectations and tastes of the monastery with those of the university. This synthesis is best exemplified in his juxtaposition of Cicero and Christ as ideal readers and speakers: while it is Christ who is described as rising, and is thus responsible for individual salvation, it is Cicero who speaks, deploying eloquence to convey a truth or incite moral action. The coupling of these figures, which in this episode appear to represent secular learning and a restricted spiritual knowledge, further indicates not just the high esteem in which he held the art of rhetoric but, more importantly, how Whethamstede integrated secular knowledge into more traditional monastic learning. Moreover, what is significant about the abbot’s use of this particular biblical allusion is his yoking of Cicero with Christ as figures representing eloquence. Although the conjunction “but” (etsi) suggests a subordination of secular to religious learning, Cicero’s presence in this episode indicates that for Whethamstede the art of rhetoric is not simply a list of formulae for composing letters or lines of verse; instead, mastery of rhetoric serves as an important adjunct to a notion of literature that foregrounds the ethically productive role of reading, a notion that is deeply monastic.

\textsuperscript{36} This idea is stated explicitly in the Psuedo-Ciceronian \textit{Rhetorica ad Herennium} (4.8.12), which, aside from being cited in a 1431 university statute as required reading for a student studying rhetoric, was one the most popular rhetorical manuals in the Middle Ages. These stylistic preconceptions were also codified in the rhetorical manuals of such modern authorities as Matthew of Vendôme, Jean Hauville, and Geoffrey of Vinsauf, all of whom we know were widely read at Gloucester College and whom Whethamstede, as W. F. Schirmer has pointed out (89), quotes in his \textit{Pabularium poetarum} [Fodder of the Poets].
Cicero’s status as a lesser Christ is touched on again when, later in his letter, Whethamstede notes that this learned Venetian, whom he describes as an “alter Cicero” (Annales 1: 137), accomplished similar miracles with the art of rhetoric to those which Christ performed by means of virtue (virtute) in Judea—he restored hearing to the deaf and even gave the mute voice in order to evangelize. The force of rhetoric, according to the abbot, rests in its power to enable individuals to follow Christ and do as he did, not through divine power, but through the power of language. Indeed, this idea itself derives from Cicero’s De inventione, which imagines the first creation of civilization by a leader who unites people not by force but by language (see 1.1.3). While such use of rhetorical knowledge in the service of clear moral objectives dates back to Augustine, Whethamstede’s comparison of Cicero with Christ indicates just how traditionally monastic his approach to the text is. The two texts that Cicero was most widely known for, and which circulated widely at the university, the Pseudo-Ciceronian Rhetorica ad Herennium and the De inventione, consist mainly of ethically neutral catalogues of rhetorical schemes and tropes. Yet these texts were also important within monastic reading culture, especially since they describe the orator’s elaborate programme of memory training which Mary Carruthers labels the “architectural mnemonic” (Memory, 71). According to this theory, memories are stamped on the brain, leaving an impression similar to the way a seal creates an image on a wax tablet. Within a monastic tradition,

37 “vir ille erat alter Cicero, qui, quo modo Christus in Judea divina facerat virtute et audire surdos et mutos loqui, ita ipse in Italia arte Rhetoricae mutorum linguas fecit disertas, vigore eloquentiae surdorum aures reddebat attentas, et pauperes vi linguae docuit evangelizare...” (Annales 1: 137).
38 Augustine argues for the value of classical rhetorical knowledge throughout much of his De doctrina christiana. James Murphy provides a useful discussion Augustine’s appropriation the classical tradition for Christian ends in Rhetoric in the Middle Ages, 289-92.
39 The image of memories as impressions on wax tablets may be found in the Pseudo-Ciceronian Rhetorica ad Herennium (3.17.30). The Ad Herennium also contains the lengthiest discussion of a “Ciceronian” architectural mnemonics, which takes up much of the third part of the treatise (see 3.16.28-3.24.40).
the notion of memories being impressed into one’s psyche like a seal into wax was used to understand how, as Carruthers succinctly summarizes Hugh of St. Victor, the “exemplary deeds and words of others... shape our moral life in shaping our memories.” This detail may provide a clue as to why Whethamstede was so attracted to the exuberant rhetoric which distinguishes his literary aesthetic. The aureate rhetorical style that is represented by the figure of Cicero in this particular passage of the abbot’s Register certainly leaves vivid images in one’s memory: since visual images are more easily held in the memory, as Cicero states in *De oratore* (2.87.358), the use of such ornate language may have been viewed by Whethamstede as more effective in stocking the memory with exemplary words and deeds to contribute further to his readers’ moral refinement. Thus, Whethamstede’s association of Christ and Cicero is significant since it provides an example of how he may have approached the incorporation of attitudes towards language (and texts) that are clearly alien to the cloister into monastic literary culture. Of course, Whethamstede was not alone in viewing the Roman in this way: Lydgate, another Benedictine educated at Gloucester College, uses Cicero in a very similar way. Both Lois Ebin and Lee Patterson comment on Lydgate’s Ciceronian poetic which views rhetoric as an essential skill for establishing a stable polity as well as for maintaining the individual’s prudent conduct. Here and elsewhere throughout his Registers, the rhetorical and poetic tastes of the university, in which the abbot is greatly

40 In *The Book of Memory*, Carruthers begins a discussion of the strong association between memory and the novice’s ethical formation by quoting Hugh of St. Victor’s use of the seal-in-wax trope in his “De institutione novitorum” (*PL* 176, 933B) (see *Memory*, 71-79).
41 Quoting from Hugh of St. Victor’s “De institutione novitorum,” Carruthers elaborates on how the seal-in-wax trope depicts how “we who desire to be shaped up through the examples of goodness as if by a seal that is very well sculpted, discover in them certain lofty traces of deeds like projections and certain humble ones like depressions” (quoted in *Memory*, 71)
42 For Ebin’s discussion of Lydgate’s praise of Cicero as an exemplar of this model of rhetoric in *The Fall of Princes*, see “Lydgate’s Views on Poetry” (101-03). Patterson briefly reiterates this idea in his discussion of Lydgate’s *Siege of Thebes* (see “Making Identities” 75).
invested, are always subordinated to a notion of the text as a vehicle to incite the performance of ethical action and reshape the ethical life of the reader.

Whethamstede’s hybridized literary aesthetic, which has puzzled readers from Riley down to the present, can be seen, then, to blend an acute sensitivity towards expression and the dignity of Latin with an equally keen understanding of the formative role of language and texts upon the reader. This combination of textual assumptions, which joins learning from the university with that of the monastery, indicates how scholars like Whethamstede were able to adapt intellectual trends originating from outside the cloister to ends that were fundamentally monastic. The subordination of secular learning is reflected not only in Cicero’s subsidiary status next to Christ, as was previously discussed, but also in the abbot’s broader literary project, which reflects more traditional monastic literary tastes. Among Whethamstede’s most significant writings are his historiographic narratives, which appear in the Annals of St Albans and in the abbot’s Register, his Pabularium poetarum (Fodder of Poets), a volume of quotations from poets divided alphabetically into 4 books, the Palearium poetarum (Chaff-bin of Poets), an encyclopaedic work containing 692 entries on classical history and mythology, and his most elaborate work, the Granarium (the Granary), an encyclopaedia that survives in two parts and contains entries on classical and medieval historians, along with comments on their works, a range of historical topics, as well as a dictionary of historical figures from antiquity. As a historiographer, a compiler of florilegiae, and encyclopaedist, Whethamstede is clearly working within well-defined genres of monastic literature.43 Moreover, these titles demonstrate that the alimentary value of texts is a metaphor that

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43 For excellent overviews of the literary genres favoured by monastic writers, see Leclercq, The Love of Learning 153-90, as well as Knowles, The Religious Orders in England 2: 263-79.
seems to have held a central position in the abbot’s attitude towards knowledge as well as
the assimilation of information. Each title of his encyclopaedic works plays on the
salutary role of (good) literature: the Granarium, the Pabularium poetarum, and the
Palearium poetarum. Taking advantage of his own adopted toponym, the abbot extended
this granular metaphor even to his name, Wheatampstead, which he rendered in Latin as
Frumentarius, translatable either as “grain dealer” or “forager.” Whether or not we can
read Whethamstede’s Latinized surname as evidence of a more playful side of his
personality must remain a matter for speculation; however, his description of himself as a
“grain dealer” seems to convey the abbot’s modesty since he does not claim to be an
auctor but a forager, a gatherer or dealer in other poets’ writings. Once again,
Whethamstede’s attitudes about the poet’s role in evaluating literature along with his use
of imagery deriving from the winnowing metaphor find a close analogue in Lydgate. In
his prologue to the Siege of Thebes, Lydgate insists that retaining the ethical value of a
work and preserving it with the flowers of rhetoric, or “[v]oyding the chaf... [and]
[e]nlumynyng the trewe piked greyn” (55-56), is the poet’s responsibility. While this
correspondence in attitudes is suggestive of both poets’ participation in the hybrid culture
which was emerging in Benedictine studia, what I wish to emphasize is that when
Whethamstede deploys such grain-related metaphors there can be little doubt that issues
related to reading are never far below the surface.

Equally noteworthy is the degree to which the abbot’s prose, particularly in his
historiographic work, is saturated with the language of the Bible. In recounting the
history of the abbey, as well as his own grievances and trials, Whethamstede, as Riley

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44 On Lydgate’s use of the term “enlumyn” and its use in the prologue to the Siege of Thebes, see Ebin,
“Lydgate’s Views on Poetry” 78. More recently, Scott-Morgan Straker discusses Lydgate’s notion of
rhetoric and the poet’s responsibility to morally evaluate literature in “Deference and Difference” (4).
notes, records these episodes in the manner of a “studied imitation of Holy Writ” 
(Registrum 2: xvii). This persistent application of biblical language to give shape to 
contemporary events suggests a mind that constantly saw correspondences between 
present circumstances and those within the Bible. Commenting as well on the density of 
biblical allusions in Whethamstede’s writing, Antonia Gransden observes that such 
metaphors served a number of purposes. Gransden argues that the abbot uses biblical 
language not simply to entertain his monastic readers but also to “reinforce his arguments 
by analogy” (2:376). Individuals within his historical narratives take on the personae of 
biblical figures and current events in which the Abbey is involved assume the importance 
of biblical episodes in order to persuade his readers of the truth of his opinions on recent 
history. For example, Gransden cites an episode in which Whethamstede portrays himself 
as the good servant in Luke 14:15-17, who increases the money given to him tenfold, in 
order to praise his own success in increasing the abbey’s prosperity.45 Related to this use 
of sacred texts, Whethamstede also deploys biblical allegory “to give added meaning to 
his narrative of general history” (2:377), such as when he uses allusion and direct citation 
to liken the execution of Richard, duke of York in 1460 to the crucifixion.46 In addition 
to using the Bible to underscore his own moral observations, I would add that 
Whethamstede’s persistent allusion to biblical narratives suggests a way of seeing the 
world that is also a product of a monastic psychology of reading. At this point I would 
like to return to Leclercq’s observation concerning the phenomenon of reminiscence, a 
condition that arises whereby the monk, through a daily encounter with Scripture,

45 See Gransden, Historical Writing in England 2: 377. The original episode may be found in Registrum 2: 
159-85.
46 See Gransden, Historical Writing in England 2: 377. The episode in Registrum 1: 382 draws heavily on 
the account of the crucifixion in Mathew 27:29.
expresses himself “spontaneously in a biblical vocabulary” (Leclercq, Love of Learning 75-6). In addition to Gransden’s argument for Whethamstede’s use of biblical literature as an instrument of persuasion, the abbot’s manner of expression also conforms to this pattern of reminiscence. Although Whethamstede’s is anything but spontaneous, his consistent use of biblical images suggests a mind conditioned by frequent engagement in meditative reading. Just as one of the final stages of monastic lectio was to make the reading one’s own by applying it to events in daily life, one can see the abbot conforming to habits of thought ingrained by the psychology of monastic reading in his use of the Bible to frame the history of his abbey.

An episode occurring early in Whethamstede’s first abbacy at St Albans involving the departure of one of the brothers from the abbey to the convent at Canterbury contains elements of the hybridized literary aesthetic I have been discussing. A closer look at this passage will show further that, although Whethamstede incorporates elements of the literary culture from the university and the cloister, he does not do so in a balanced fashion. While Oxford may have determined his stylistic and aesthetic concerns, monastic attitudes toward reading, primarily the re-formative role played by lectio divina, occupy a central position in the abbot’s conception of what poetry and prose do and how they work.

**Brother William’s Enfeebled Grain: Right and Wrong Reading in the Annales**

The form of Whethamstede’s historiography, which sits astride history and literature, is certainly different from the work of previous annalists at the abbey. Earlier chronicles of
the abbey, such as those of Whethamstede’s immediate predecessor Thomas Walsingham, bear a number of formal similarities, in that they comprise various documents concerning the business of the abbey, letters by the abbot himself, and passages of narrative recounting the major events of the year. Whethamstede’s annals diverge from previous models in style and content: aside from bearing Whethamstede’s own distinct literary tastes, he concludes each year with a set of original verses that offer a reflection or epitome of an event which occurred during the year. While the reason why the abbot chose to shape the annals of his abbacies in this way has puzzled critics in the past, one motive for this distinctive presentation of material may be that it drew an awareness to certain passages which might serve as a form of supplementary lectio for the monk to meditate upon. For monks, the writing of history was a way of placing current events within the wider history of salvation as well as generating further moral reading for the edification of the abbey’s community. Moreover, although compiling a valuable source of records to defend the privileges and assert the independence of a “pedigree community” like St Albans was another reason for maintaining chronicles, the most frequent motive of monastic historiographers is, as Leclercq observes, “to arouse admiration for the works and interventions of God, and consequently to have him praised and prayed to” (“Monastic Historiography” 77). And thus while recent scholarship emphasizes the political function of monastic writing, such as asserting rights in property or jurisdictional disputes, the main reason for historiographical writing is

47 While Riley, for example, is unable to explain the purpose of the verses at the end of each annal in his introduction to the second volume of the Annales (1: xi), Gransden speculates that the Abbot’s “stylistic mannerisms” are there simply to “amuse” the reader (Historical Writing in England 2: 375).
48 See John Taylor, Historical Literature in the Fourteenth Century 59-60.
49 John Ganim foregrounds the political aim of monastic historiography in his discussion of Lydgate’s poetry by stressing how his “role as a poet and a monk at Bury St Edmunds involves him in the larger defence of exemptions, privileges, and liberties associated with the monastery” (166).
more often a devotional one. There is a close correspondence between this paradigm of reading, meditation, and prayer and the meditative reading encouraged by lectio. Indeed, in the episodes that concern the abbot’s dream and the brother’s apostasy we can see how easily such events can be set apart from the litigious concerns that occupy much of the register, in order to facilitate such reflective reading.

The verses that conclude each year draw out a moral from a significant episode during the year and frame the material within an ethical reading—no matter how forced. For instance, although the annal for 1435-6 is largely concerned with obtaining quit-rents from various parties in London who have been withholding money from the abbey, Whethamstede ends the year with a poetic reflection on the negligence of his officials in recovering the quit-rents, complete with an allusion to Juvenal (Annales 2: 120-21). The migration of Brother William to the monastery at Canterbury furnished the abbot with ample material to indulge his talents in crafting an annal rich in biblical and classical allusions, packed with ornament and with heavy moral overtones. Written during the second year of Whethamstede’s first abbacy (1421-22), this incident is recounted at significant length and comprises a narrative account as well as a letter to the monk, a copy of the revised oath to be taken by novices in the future, and, of course, some verses, which conclude the annal. Moving backwards, I will begin by discussing the formal characteristics of Whethamstede’s concluding verses and locate the source of its rhetorical complexity and rhythmic density in the manuals for poetic composition which circulated at the university. While the formal elements of the poem all point to the rhetorical training and poetic tastes that were popular at Oxford, his privileging a certain body of texts (and learning) traditionally associated with the cloister as well as the stress
he places on the importance of meditative reading highlight the abbot’s desire to set monastic reading culture apart from competing, secular traditions. At stake in identifying as monastic Whethamstede’s literary assumptions, which have most often been mistaken for those of either a proto- or a failed humanist, is the broader status of the abbot’s oeuvre. Rather than viewing Whethamstede as backward looking, this episode clearly indicates that the abbot not only is at the forefront of contemporary cultural movements but is also careful to integrate these traditions within monastic culture in such a way as to emphasize the distinctiveness of monkish reading as well as reinscribe religious life as different from and superior to life outside the cloister.

Perhaps most immediately striking about the episode concerning William’s “apostasy”—which is described both in the legal sense of a religious who renounces his order without legal dispensation and in the more figurative sense of one who forsakes his religious faith—are the seventeen lines of verse that terminate this annal. These lines provide a perfect example of Whethamstede’s use of ornate, florid Latin as well as his predilection for complex and involved rhetorical schemes and patterns of rhyme when composing elevated verse. Such poetic set pieces, which amply display Whethamstede’s fidelity to a rhetorical tradition that thrived at Gloucester College, furnish rich examples of a type of versifying neatly epitomized in Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s Poetria nova, which counsels the following: “If you wish to speed onward by means of the weighty style, have recourse to these sails [the lengthy catalogue of rhetorical schemes and tropes he proceeds to list], occupy this harbour, cast the mind’s anchor here” (54). A closer look at this poem illustrates the rhythmic and rhetorical sophistication of which he was capable.
In a poem of only seventeen lines, Whethamstede displays his rhythmical virtuosity by incorporating at least four different forms of rhymed hexameters.\textsuperscript{50} First are the simple leonine hexameters.\textsuperscript{51} Also included are unisoni or “single-sound” leonines in couplets.\textsuperscript{52} Whethamstede as well includes collaterally rhyming hexameters\textsuperscript{53} and, finally, a cruciform hexameter.\textsuperscript{54} Superimposed over these complex rhymed patterns Whethamstede employs such rhetorical schemes as anaphora\textsuperscript{55} and consonance.\textsuperscript{56} The abbot even incorporates a classicizing feature into his verse by adding alliteration.\textsuperscript{57} Although Whethamstede achieves a high level of technical sophistication, the consequences, however, of this rhythmic complexity are lines that do not scan and an impregnable syntax, which results in verses that are almost untranslatable.

While the difficulties in comprehending the meaning of the lines that arise from Whethamstede’s layering of complex poetic and rhetorical schemes upon his hexameters has drawn scathing criticism from generations of critics,\textsuperscript{58} any reading of the abbot’s

\textsuperscript{50}Definitions of the different verse forms are taken from A.G. Rigg, \textit{Anglo-Latin Literature 1066-1422} 319- 22. For another example of a detailed reading of Whethamstede’s complex arrangement of hexameters, see Carlson, “The Civic Poetry of Abbot John Whethamstede of St Albans (†1465)” 210-13.
\textsuperscript{51}These hexameters depend on rhyme between the strong caesura and the end of the line. These are found in lines 3 to 6 and 14 to 17.
\textsuperscript{52}These hexameters require four rhymes, as in lines 7 to 8 where “siliquas,” “appropriatas,” “salutiferas” and “escas” all rhyme.
\textsuperscript{53}Here caesura rhymes with caesura and final syllable with final syllable, as in lines 1 to 2 where Whethamstede rhymes “messem” with “frumentum” and “nocenti” with “aratri.”
\textsuperscript{54}These are hexameters in which the caesura of one line rhymes with the end of the next and vice versa and appear in lines 10 and 11 where “respondes” rhymes with “fraudes” and “vestis” with “testis.”
\textsuperscript{55}Anaphora is the repetition of the same word at the start of the verse line and appears in the poem when Whethamstede triples his use of “sic” and “si.”
\textsuperscript{56}Consonance is the resemblance of stressed consonant sounds and is present in the first line of the poem with “messem percussum.”
\textsuperscript{57}The most obvious example being the ninth line, which follows the traditional alliterative pattern of a a | a x: “Post claustrum que chorum Chironis inhostipat antrum.”
\textsuperscript{58}H. T. Riley, in his introduction to the second volume of the \textit{Annales}, asserts that the Abbot’s verse is written “without regard to the laws of grammar, metre, or sense” and are, as a result, “a mass of mere gibberish” (lvi). More recently, Roberto Weiss, in \textit{Humanism in England During the Fifteenth Century}, has attacked his poetry as “abominable” (33) and argues that his “subject matter is usually sacrificed on the altar of form” (37), while Antonia Gransden, in \textit{Historical Writing in England}, comments that the language he deploys “makes the texture of his works so loose that the information in them is hard to isolate” (2: 378).
verse must not ignore the literary culture which shaped his aesthetic sensibilities. Recent attempts by David Carlson to foreground Whethamstede’s literary debt to a “scholastic style” of versification are an important first step in developing a more complete understanding of the abbot’s poetic aims (“Civic Poetry” 210-13; “Whethamstede on Lollardy” 21-41). While it is now clear that Whethamstede’s predilection for erudite and ornate verse owes strong debts to the literary tastes cultivated at Gloucester College, one must also remember the audience for whom the abbot was writing—namely, a monastic, intellectual elite who shared a similar education. Although many modern readers might find such rhetorical embellishment jarring or in poor taste, Whethamstede’s monastic readers would have immediately recognized the tradition out of which his work arose. Given the favourable contemporary accounts of the abbot’s writing, it is quite likely that his readers at St Albans, as well as at the various other houses at which his work may have circulated, saw him as a virtuoso who was able to manipulate rules for poetic composition set out by such authorities as Matthew of Vendôme, Jean Hauville, and Geoffrey of Vinsauf, all of whom we know the abbot read. To be sure, the elevated tone which the abbot adopted in his verses would have immediately signalled to his readers the gravity with which the material was to be read.

One of the most striking features about this passage is that Whethamstede repeatedly frames William’s apostasy as the result of a renunciation of monastic reading for the lures of secular texts. While it is only natural that a poem written on the desertion of a monk should present a highly favourable, if not idealized, portrait of monastic life while at the same time warning against the threats posed to it by worldly contamination,

59 Whethamstede was widely esteemed by a number of his contemporaries. Henry Chichele, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was one such admirer and requested that the abbot write certain “letters of embassy” to the Pope on behalf of all the clergy and realm of England (Annales 2: 17).
the stress that the abbot places on foregrounding claustral reading, which includes the
practice of *lectio divina*, nevertheless illustrates his commitment to distinguishing
monastic reading culture as fundamentally separate from secular traditions. The
distinctness of this culture is indicated at the beginning of the passage where one
encounters familiar monastic tropes that idealized the cloister as well as the mirroring of
contemporary events onto a biblical narrative. Whethamstede begins his figurative
account of the brother’s apostasy by deploying commonplace language of monastic
retreat:

> From the clay of the earth and from the dust of poverty was this man created and
> placed in a Paradise of contemplation [*Paradiso contemplationis*] so that he may
> work according to the rule and guard it as a monk; this having been granted to
> him freely to enjoy claustral delights and indifferently to eat of every tree of
> religion, while nevertheless keeping one commandment, that is that he faithfully
> abstain from the tree of knowledge, which directs one to evil. (*Annales* 1: 89)

As before, Whethamstede fuses a biblical narrative onto a historical episode by
representing the cloister as an Edenic garden. Describing life at the Abbey as a “Paradise
of contemplation” and later as a “cloistered heaven,” Whethamstede continues to tell how
a former brother of St Albans, “a crafty serpent” (*Annales* 1: 89), enters and tempts
William with a threefold apple, a “pomunque triplarium” (*Annales* 1: 89) to migrate to
Christ Church with the promise of better food, pecuniary profit, free conversation during
recreational hours and a greater opportunity to study music. Whethamstede thus confronts
the threats posed by disciplinary laxity to communal life by casting William’s departure
as a fall from grace—the gravest event in the Old Testament narrative. As with the long
narrative of decline that follows the biblical fall, Whethamstede hints that this move will
also entail a subsequent diminishing of spiritual and intellectual rigour. In describing St

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60 While this metaphor, in fact, dates back to the time of the Desert Fathers, Catherine of Siena’s *Dialogo*
(1378) is one of the best known examples that is closest to Whethamstede’s period.
Albans as a paradise for contemplation, Whethamstede makes it is easy to forget that William is simply changing houses and not departing from religious life altogether. St Albans was one of the most intellectually active and vibrant monasteries in the latter Middle Ages, and as a result the brother’s departure is cast as a renunciation of this culture.

The theme of right reading and the elevation of monastic *lectio* are strongly emphasised in the abbot’s letter of expostulation to the young monk. By using a nexus of food imagery, Whethamstede locates the origins of William’s rejection of monastic life at St Albans with his rejection of monastic literature, although this is not immediately evident. Returning to his earlier use of agricultural metaphors, he now depicts the brother’s apostasy as a preference for improper food. However, near the end of the letter, Whethamstede puts this imagery aside and directly associates William’s choices with a failure to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate literature. We can trace this progression of images when the abbot draws upon agricultural metaphors strongly associated with Eucharistic imagery to underscore the gravity of the brother’s decision:

> ...we created you from nothing, by not having noticed that we have fed you, and supplied drink, with the kernel of the wheat and with the most undiluted blood of the grape, the yoke of our obedience you have thrown back, and you have abandoned [our] house, and the mistress who made you above the high earth, thus squandering fertile pasturelands and the fruit of the fields.\(^{62}\)

Whethamstede affirms that while William was supplied with the “kernel of wheat” and with the “most undiluted blood of the grape” at St Albans, he nevertheless rejected the

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\(^{61}\) For a discussion of St Albans as a centre for elite culture at the end of the Middle Ages, see James G. Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans.*

\(^{62}\) “...te creavimus de nihilo, non adverso quod te pavimus, potavimusque, cum medulla tritici et sanguine uvae meracissimo, nostrae obedientiae jugum projecisti retrorsum, domumque dereliquisti, ac dominam, quae te constituit super excelsam terram, ut pinguia pascua comederes, frutusque agrorum” (*Annales* 1: 92).
“fertile pasturelands and the fruit of the fields” of the monastery and, by his deed, now sows a poisonous crop that endangers the community of St Albans (Annales 1: 92). In such metaphorical language, Whethamstede delivers two major indictments against William that run throughout the entire passage: that he has rejected the salutary nourishment of religious life, and that he threatens the harmony of communal life at the Abbey. His crime is thus one of eating since he not only chooses the threefold apple responsible for his own fall in place of the food provided by claustral living but also introduces noxious matter into the community, which is figured as a body. What both of these charges have in common, however, is that each one is depicted as the consequence of valuing secular literature over traditional monastic lectio.

Brother William’s construction as a contaminating agent within the monastery is developed at various points throughout the episode and, on each occasion, Whethamstede locates the source of his status as a corrupting force in the monk’s incomplete or adulterated reading practices. The first allusion to William’s detrimental influence on the community comes early on when, justifying his consent to the monk’s migration, Whethamstede quotes Benedict’s directive in the Rule that “If one who is unfaithful wish to depart, let him depart, lest he contaminate the whole flock” (Annales 1. 90; RB 28. 225). This chapter of the Rule as well outlines the procedures and remedies for the disciplining the monk and cites the “medicine of divine Scripture” (RB 28. 225) as the final tool for reforming the monk’s conduct before applying the “cauterizing iron of excommunication” (RB 28. 225). In other words, the abbot’s allowing for the departure of the monk suggests that the formative reading programme of lectio divina has already been rejected by the monk. The threat of contamination owing to imperfect reading
practices, although only obliquely present in the passage above, is underscored in Whethamstede’s verses on the matter, which distil the events and images contained in the preceding episode. The abbot’s concern with the premature disruption of monastic formation is foregrounded in the first lines of his poem, where he describes William’s worldly desire as well as the threat he now poses to the community in general:

Thus before the harvest is cut the grain is enfeebled by a harmful dew, the work of the plough is vain. If before her time the pregnant woman gives birth, there emerges an abortion of viperish stock, devouring the entrails of its mother. So he, who in name only renounced the world, returns to his own vomit, and a monk too becomes a dog.63

The harmful dew which contaminates crops and the viper who devours its mother are images that both centre around processes that were untimely disrupted and describe the interruption of the young monk’s own formation at St Albans. The result of this disruption, indicated in the concluding clause by an allusion to Peter’s citation of Proverbs 26:11 in the New Testament to describe the false teachers who threaten to destroy the church through their desires for worldly pleasure (2 Peter 2:22), is a monk who poses a significant threat to the stability of the community. While Whethamstede dwells on the dangers William poses to the brothers at St Albans, his main preoccupation, however, is with the reading preferences of the monk, which lie, according to Whethamstede, at the heart of his migration from the Abbey.

William’s failure to select properly the literature that he ought to devote himself to is one of the central concerns of the passage, which serves as an oblique warning to

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63 Sic citra messem percussum rore nocenti
Marcet frumentum, labor est inanis aratri.
Sic citra tempus praegnans parit, exit aborsus
Viperei generis comedentis viscera matris.
Sic redit ad vomitum vomuit qui nomine mundum,
Fit monachusque canis; (Annales 1: 96, lines 1-6)
later readers at St Albans of the dangers of devoting one’s attention to secular literature at
the expense of more traditional monastic reading. Immediately following the abbot’s
attack on the monk’s detrimental impact on the community in the verses quoted above,
Whethamstede, once more employing a biblical allusion, attacks the monk’s literary
choices and reading strategies:

This our apostate brother stands witness, who—for husks suitable only for pigs—
vigorously scorned healthy food and after the cloister the cave of Chiron shelters
the chorus.64

Extending the agricultural / digestive metaphor used throughout the episode,
Whethamstede depicts the monk as preferring the “husk” to the “healthy food” of
monastic life. Not only does the poem cast William as a type of prodigal son but it may
also return us, albeit obliquely, to the issue of traditional monastic reading. The husk
clearly signifies life outside the cloister; but it can also stand-in for the defective reading
practices and inferior body of textual material that the monk has devoted himself to, a
devotion more to the text’s integumentum or poetic covering than to its spiritual kernel.
Seemingly incongruous at first glance, the rich covering of poetic ornamentation that
Whethamstede fashions for a poem so concerned with the neglect of traditional monastic
reading stresses the need to penetrate this covering.

Moreover, Whethamstede’s description of monastic life as “healthy food” is also
strongly suggestive of digestion-rumination metaphors used to describe meditative
reading. Elaborating on this image, Carruthers notes that ruminatio describes the process
of regurgitation and, in a monastic context, represents the memory as a stomach and the

64 “stat noster apostata testis,
Qui, propter siliquas porcellis appropriatas,
Valde salutiferas monachatus spreverat escas,
Post claustrum que chorum Chironis inhospitat antrum.” (Annales 1: 98, lines 6-9)
text as the cud, which was eaten from the meadows of books within the monastic enclosure. Whethamstede’s use of such alimentary metaphors to stand in for a religious *conversatio* that is strongly attached to a certain body of texts is further suggested when one considers his conviction regarding the monastery as being best able to provide the monk with suitable grain to ruminate on. The connection between this episode and a broader group of ideas associated with rumination metaphors is further supported when one considers that these metaphors were also developed to discuss the effect of meditative reading on the monk’s interior moral formation. In her discussion of reading as an ethical activity, Carruthers’s frequent quotation of Hugh of St. Victor renders this relationship explicit. Drawing in part on Hugh’s detailed description of the process of meditative reading as a model to frame her own discussion of memory and the formation of moral virtue, Carruthers cites the *Didascalicon*, which directly links the importance of memory training to completing the demanding process of monastic *lectio*: in order to reach the culmination of this programme, to become “permanently changed” (*Memory* 186), the monk must frequently “recall [the text] from the stomach of memory to the palate.” In this passage, as well as others already discussed, the ability of monasticism to provide “healthy food” such as the “kernel of wheat” and “most undiluted blood of the grape” from the “fertile pasturelands” of the monastery certainly suggests the additional presence of ideas related to the dynamic role of meditative reading implied by ruminative metaphors in Whethamstede’s own use of agricultural and digestive imagery.

The “healthy food” of monastic life, which is shaped by monasticism’s distinctive literary tradition, is thus set against the culture (as well as the more literal gluttony) of

65 *Memory* 165. Ivan Illich explains this same metaphor in *The Vineyard of the Text* 54-57.
66 *Didascalicon* 3.2 quoted in *Memory* 165.
those belonging to Chiron’s choir. Well suited given the monk’s choice to leave St Albans to study music at Canterbury, Chiron, as the legendary tutor of Achilles and other Greek heroes, is traditionally represented as an educator and musician, and is thus an apt choice as a signifier for the privileging of secular literature. As well, the cave in which he instructed these heroes, according to some traditions, was located on the banks of the river Anaurus, which separated the world of the centaurs from humanity. As a centaur living in a state of nature, Chiron and his band (of centaurs?) may also have stood in for the dark associations linked to these mythological creatures who combine the aggressiveness of their animal nature with human reason and whose lust, violence and desire for alcohol were figured as destructive forces that threatened civilization (see “Centaurs”). By leaving the cloister for the cave where the centaurs freely indulge their appetites, William, the potentially civilized monk, is brought down by his own carnal desires and becomes like the centaurs—gluttonous, unrestrained and doomed. Indeed, as I shall argue below Whethamstede takes great pains to point out the dangerous outcome both to oneself and to the community that result from pursuing such improper desires as a devotion to secular culture without having properly assimilated it into a monastic tradition.

Whethamstede’s use of the figure of Chiron may also hint at an implicit teacher-pupil jealousy that existed between the abbot and the brother. The Annal notes that just prior to William’s departure, St Albans readmitted another apostate monk, William Shepeye, who abandoned religious life forty years earlier in order to join Urban VI’s

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67 The main characteristics of centaurs are lechery and desire for wine, but from the time of Hesiod’s *Theogony* centaurs were also viewed as constituting a “sacrilegious anti-society that devours raw meat... [but] is inevitably defeated by civilized man” (“Centaurs”; for reference in Hesiod, see *Theogony* 542).
crusade against the followers of the Anti-pope, the Clementists, in Flanders.\textsuperscript{68} Given that this episode directly precedes the brother’s departure in the chronicle, it is immediately apparent that maintaining the monastic vocation against the attractions of other houses, such as the Priory at Canterbury, or even other occupations within the Church, such as Shepeye’s decision to renounce the habit to become the pope’s chaplain, was a major concern for the abbot. While migration to communities that observed a stricter form of religious life was acceptable, the fact that a dispensation was obtained from the Archbishop of Canterbury in order to transfer from St Albans to Canterbury (see \textit{Annales} 1: 90) implies that migration was still far from common. Moreover, the length of this episode in the chronicle further suggests that Whethamstede found William’s departure especially perturbing. The presence of Chiron, as musician and educator, may hint at the fact that Whethamstede viewed William primarily as a pupil gone astray who was lured away from St Albans by a rival body of knowledge taught by hostile instructors. As well, William’s departure may have wounded the abbot’s pride, since his migration may have been viewed as a rejection of the intellectual culture at St Albans that Whethamstede worked so hard to maintain. While such speculations about the abbot’s motives for writing such a detailed account of a young monk’s departure from the abbey must remain conjectural, the connections between the brother’s rejection of monastic life and his rejection of monastic reading in favour of another body of learning is made explicit in the abbot’s prose.

Earlier in this episode Whethamstede employed a range of agricultural metaphors and food imagery to suggest that William’s rejection of monastic life at St Albans was

\textsuperscript{68} For a full account of William Shepeye’s departure from Hatfield Priory, a dependant cell of St. Albans, to join Urban’s campaign as a Papal Chaplain, see \textit{Annales} 1: 86-88.
owing to his rejection of monastic literature: near the end of the letter, the abbot makes this accusation explicitly. Warning him of the contempt in which the wandering monk is held in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, Whethamstede traces the monk’s movement toward apostasy as the outcome of his literary preferences in a passage which is uniquely set off from the text:

You who had begun with the spirit have now ended with the flesh, or, rather, you have unhappily finished your life. On the contrary where for now you sing satirically together with the poet—

“Oh well for me, since the place for me is the theatre”

Having been renewed then with the Psalmist you may have then recalled with the Psalmist in elegiacs, “Woe to me, because my sojourn is prolonged with such pain.”

The progress outlined by Whethamstede from spirit to flesh is juxtaposed with a similar movement between literary extremes—from the pious elegies of the Psalmist to the secular, satirical works of the “theatre.” While the exact text which the abbot quotes has not been determined, his choice of the Psalter as the text to which the monk ought to devote himself is significant. Although esteem for the psalms is not unique to monks, its centrality to monastic culture cannot be overstated. Not only did this text form the basis of the Divine Office, but it also served as the primary material for monastic *lectio*. The dichotomy, then, that Whethamstede draws between the pious gravity of the Psalms and the satiric verses of the theatre further suggests that William’s desire to leave St Albans

69 In the first chapter of the Rule, Benedict provides a brief description of the four types of monks and notes that the wandering monks (gyrovagi) are “always on the move ...and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites” (RB 1. 171).

59                “Qui cum spiritu inceperas, cum carne nunc desineres, aut infelicitier consummares vitam tuam. Immo ubi pro nunc poeta concantas satyrice,—
                 “Euge mihi, quoniam locus est mihi theatrī”
                 renovatus pro tunc cum Psalmista recenserēs elegiace,— “Heu me! Quia incolatus meus cum tanto est stimulo prolongatus” (*Annales* 1: 93).

The biblical quotation Whethamstede cites is from Psalm 119:5.
lay in his rejection of traditional monastic reading practices and subject matter. In the following sentences Whethamstede develops this distinction further by drawing upon food imagery, at once constructing the monk’s decision as a dietary choice and, at the same time, framing the decision as a matter of literary preferences. “On account of the pots of meat,” Whethamstede, writing to the monk, asserts, “you have scorned the angelic bread, and for the desire of freedom, and of pleasure of the gullet, you have withdrawn from the Lord God, and you think little of your salvation.”\footnote{“quomodo propter ollas cranium manna spreveras angelicum, qualiterque libertatis libidine, voluptatisque ingluvie, a Domino Deo recesseras, ac contempseras salutare tuum” (Annales 1: 94).} Not only referring to actual food since the monk seeks to adopt a less ascetic way of life, Whethamstede’s words take on a more significant figurative meaning. Having rejected the spiritual bread of monastic living as well as the sober verses of the Psalter meditated upon during \textit{lectio divina}, the monk himself becomes the “food of death” and the nourishment for sin (\textit{Annales} 1: 93).

At the end of the letter, the abbot underscores once more the detrimental effect of the monk’s reading practices when he accuses the monk of neither adhering “to our writings, nor valuing our words” nor even of having “adequately digested the glosses of canon law in his stomach.”\footnote{“nostris scriptis non adhaeseris, nec appretiaris sermonem, statuimus tunc coram te codicem Canonis, in quo si glossam cum textu digesto stomacho discusseris” (Annales 1: 96).} Again and again, Whethamstede locates the source of monk’s apostasy in his defective reading habits, and suggests that William’s deviation from the programme of monastic \textit{lectio} is responsible for his deformation of character.
Alternative Readings: Some Conclusions

The considerable emphasis which Whethamstede places on the role of *lectio divina* in this episode concerning the migration of a monk from St Albans, along with his vision of St Bernard, and his prescriptions of monastic reading to reform Redbourn, suggests an attempt by the abbot to exploit traditional monastic reading as a tool for reinscribing differences between monastic and secular reading cultures in order to articulate the monk’s own distinctive identity. As a historiographer and poet, Whethamstede is eager to place himself at the forefront of contemporary cultural movements, and he accomplishes this by assimilating the latest literary traditions en vogue at the university to his own diverse body of writing which belongs to a fundamentally monastic reading culture. Indeed, by adopting a grandiloquent tone packed with biblical and classical allusions, the abbot signals his cultivation as well as membership in a community of university-educated Latin authors. As Daniel Wakelin notes, late medieval authors like the abbot dressed their writing “with mythographic trimmings” as away of establishing “the ethos of the writer or speaker and his addresses” (63). Wakelin later comments that the “surplus of information” found in these numerous allusions creates and binds a community of readers (99). However, while Wakelin applies these arguments to early English humanists writing in the century before the Reformation, I would argue that such reasoning can also be applied to Whethamstede’s canon in order to explain his prestige among clerical elites in England, many of whom were trained at Oxford. Despite scattered references to Boccaccio and Petrarch in his *Granarium* as well as his association with the small group
of Italian humanists in Humphrey’s circle, there is little reason to place Whethamstede within this category.

Whethamstede’s desire to set religious life and its distinctive reading culture so far apart from competing secular traditions may also have served as a response to broader religious and political currents of the time. As abbot of St Albans, Whethamstede occupied the role of politician as well as diplomat throughout his life and was thus deeply immersed in the social and political life early of fifteenth-century England. While the crisis of legitimacy surrounding Lancastrian claims to the thrown has dominated scholarly attention to the period,73 the first decades of the fifteenth century were also marked by a growing concern over the state of Benedictine monasticism. By 1420, attacks on the Black Monks were becoming increasingly frequent and forceful, especially within ecclesiastical circles.74 The mounting chorus of criticism of the order reached its height when, in 1421, Henry V decided to intervene personally to reform the Order75 and the outcome of his efforts was thirteen proposals for the improvement of monastic life. Among the committee members elected by the brothers to discuss these articles was the newly appointed abbot of St Albans, John Whethamstede,76 and it was to him, the youngest member of the delegation, that the task of producing a revised list of seven counterproposals to the king’s demands fell.

73 For one of the most important and influential discussions on the Lancastrian attempts to legitimate their claim to the throne, see Paul Strohm’s England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation 1399-1422.
74 See Knowles, Religious Orders 2: 182. Clark also offers a brief survey of contemporary criticisms against the Benedictines as well as against the Abbey of St. Albans throughout the first chapter of A Monastic Renaissance at St. Albans (10-41).
75 It remains unknown what exactly prompted the king to act. One contemporary monk speculated that Robert Layton, the Carthusian Prior of Mount Grace and former Benedictine, inspired Henry to launch his programme of reform (Knowles, Religious Orders 2:182).
76 Other members of this six person delegation included monks with very distinguished diplomatic careers such as John Fordam, who had represented the Order at the Council of Constance, and Thomas Spofford, abbot of St Mary’s at York, who also had been at the Council of Constance.
Although scholarly consensus views the abbot’s *modificacio* as a document aimed at circumventing important issues by simply “dropping or mitigating all obnoxious matter,”\(^77\) the language and strategy Whethamstede employs to defend his Order is reminiscent of an approach that he would return to again and again of stressing monastic otherness. Behind his characteristic prolixity,\(^78\) Whethamstede’s preamble to the *modificacio* openly addresses attacks made against monastic life from outside the cloister and defends Benedictine life by ascribing to it a uniqueness that originates from its own distinctive form of living. Wasting no time, the abbot begins with a dense set of biblical allusions that associate religious life with patterns of ideal pious living that arouses envy and anger in a hostile society.\(^79\) Eager to reinforce boundaries between the “purity” and “cleanness” of cloistered living,\(^80\) Whethamstede situates the secular world in opposition to this ideal and states that neither the laity, who diminish themselves through self-interest, nor the world, replete with intense mistrust, possess these qualities.\(^81\) At the end of this lengthy period, the abbot makes it clear that it is because of this separateness—underscored by the absence of a set of qualities in the people—that any assault originating from outside the cloister is “unable to damage” the Order (Pantin, *Documents* 77


\(^78\) Knowles and Wylie and Waugh vilify Whethamstede’s text as “verbose” without actually considering purpose of either the language the abbot uses or the allusions he makes throughout the document. See *Religious Orders* 2: 184 and *The Reign of Henry the Fifth* 3: 284-85.

\(^79\) In the first lines of the document, Whethamstede likens the “holy religion of the monks” to “a target put in place again for the arrow” and “a rock of scandal for the one who stumbles” [“Cum sacra monachorum religio in hac valle lacrimabili, ubi velut signum reponitur ad sagittam, et quasi petra scandali in offensionem...”] (Pantin, *Documents* 2: 125). The image of the target set up for an arrow is taken from Lamentations 3:12 and is spoken by the prophet narrator who laments his persecution, while the image of the rock that will cause people to stumble is taken from 1 Peter 2:8 and refers to the belief in Christ’s divinity which many cannot accept.

\(^80\) After inserting the aforementioned allusions, Whethamstede links the lives of the Fathers, whose testimony of pious, religious life “shines in purity” and whose “cleanliness of mind glistens” (Pantin, *Documents* 2: 125).

\(^81\) “...quod nec populus habeat, unde per ministratam occasionem sibi detrahat, nec mundus per violentam suspicionem” (Pantin, *Documents* 2: 125).
Although much of the content of this preamble is commonplace for monastic apologists, it is, nevertheless, worth citing since it demonstrates how Whethamstede’s insistence on the uniqueness of monastic identity is asserted in a variety of contexts when confronting external cultural or political challenges. For Whethamstede, the unique conversatio of the monk, which he frequently articulates in terms of the uniqueness of his reading, renders the brothers beyond secular reproach. Thus, while such tactics are more clearly evident in his historiography, where monastic reading is repeatedly invoked to define the distinctness and pre-eminence of monastic identity, this strategy of reinscribing the singularity of religious life is employed explicitly to differentiate and prioritize monastic authority in his diplomatic efforts.

Returning to where we began, it is worth reflecting on how Whethamstede’s attempts to refurbish monastic lectio for fifteenth-century readers has repeatedly been mistaken as some form of nascent English humanism. The formative role played by reading sacred and classical literary masterpieces, the necessity of withdrawing into a solitary space of studious repose, as well as the use of reading to link communities spread over large geographical distances are essential notions of Whethamstede’s conception of reading as well what it meant to be a monk. These beliefs and practices also bear a strong resemblance to the ideals of early humanists. Whethamstede would have recognized these similarities with humanist literary culture, and there can be little doubt that such correspondences would have made him receptive to this new movement. However, what

82 The Abbot’s modificacio is not the only instance where he adopts such language when arguing for privileges for the Benedictines or exemptions for his abbey. Whethamstede quarrels with secular ecclesiastical authorities abound in the Annals during his abbacy. One of the most notable and protracted episodes in the Annals focuses on the Abbot’s quarrel with the Bishop of Norwich, William Alnwick, who himself urged Henry to enforce his reforms of the Benedictines (see Annales 1: 328-42); on Alnwick’s urging the king to reform the Black Monks, see Hayes, “Alnwick, William.”
critics have seen as a movement in his writings toward the secular humanism already well
established in Italy, I would argue, may instead be a movement backward on the part of
the humanists to the monastic humanism of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Unlike
Lydgate, who, as I shall discuss, adapts monastic reading for lay readers and blurs
boundaries between lay and religious reader as part of a more complex and conservative
social and theological agenda, Whethamstede exploits monastic reading only to reinforce
boundaries between monk and layperson in order to defend it from the force of new and
dynamic secular traditions. Thus, what both monks have in common is that their use of
monkish reading is tied to broader social and cultural issues. In Whethamstede’s case, a
return to lectio was not simply a tool for reforming religious laxity but a necessary
distinguishing feature of monastic life that could be used strategically when confronting
new challenges that threatened monasticism’s distinct literary cultural as well as those
that continued to erode the esteem and the authority of the Benedictines within the
Church and English society in general.
Chapter Three

Reading Mary:

Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady and Monastic Lectio

Although scholarly appreciation of the complexity of John Lydgate’s secular poetry has in the last decade taken significant steps forward, Lydgate’s religious verse, which comprises an equally considerable portion of his canon, continues to receive a disproportionately small amount of critical attention. This fact seems even more striking when one considers that Lydgate wrote a massive amount of religious poetry not long after ecclesiastical authorities had imposed severe prohibitions on writing that either rendered any portion of the Bible into English or discussed any doctrine of the Catholic faith\(^1\)—two activities openly performed throughout the monk’s poetry. This chapter responds to this critical oversight by considering Lydgate’s incorporation of elements of monastic devotional culture into the Life of Our Lady. I will argue that Lydgate draws widely upon practices, such as the meditative reading strategy of lectio divina, as well as customs, such as a rigid programme of daily prayer, that originate in the cloister in order to give his portrait of the Virgin a monastic inflection that depicts her as living out an exemplary religious vocation. Furthermore, Lydgate draws extensively on monastic reading culture when structuring the Life; thus, I will also argue that the poem itself is organized in such a way as to facilitate calculated meditative responses from the reader. Such responses, I will suggest, form part of a larger strategy on the part of the text to confine lay encounters with scriptural and doctrinal material within orthodox parameters. Finally, my discussion of the poem’s adaptation of monastic reading and devotional

\(^1\) The publication in 1409 of Thomas Arundel’s Constitutions served as the culmination of a decade-long debate about the use of the vernacular and imposed strict prohibitions on the translation of sacred texts.
practices will touch on the complex set of power relations within which the poem positions itself. Lydgate’s exportation of religious culture through the *Life of Our Lady* clearly caters to a laity eager for a greater share of spiritual authority at a time when vernacular religious literature was so thoroughly scrutinized. Yet, in spite of this apparent concession, the poem’s efforts to channel lay piety in orthodox directions not only reinscribe the authority of the religious establishment but may also serve as a measured reply to Henry V’s attempt to reform Benedictine monasticism.

Early in his *Life of Our Lady*, John Lydgate relates how the Virgin Mary, at quite an early age, dedicates her “handeʒ to wereke” and her “mought to pray” (1.231) and devotes many hours to “hevenly meditacions” and “[i]nwarde contemplacions” (1.856; 1.858). These activities and the routines which shape her daily life in Lydgate’s poem bear a remarkable similarity to a life lived in the cloister. Projecting the patterns and rituals of religious life backward onto Mary was, however, not unusual at this time, especially given the accretion of apocryphal material embellishing the Virgin’s piety. Owing to the enormous popularity of Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* as well as pseudo-Bonaventure’s *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, which helped to promote this construction of Mary as living a proto-monastic life, such representations of the Virgin’s pious youth were, in turn, disseminated to an English vernacular audience through a range of works, including Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* and

\[2\] All references to John Lydgate’s *The Life of Our Lady* are taken from Joseph A. Lauritis’s 1961 edition of that text.

\[3\] In their accounts of the Virgin’s youth, both Jacobus and pseudo-Bonaventure acknowledge that their accounts draw on material from a letter by St. Jerome to Chromatius and Heliodorus (see Jacobus 15; Bonaventure 12). This information, however, neither appears in that letter nor in the apocryphal *De nativitate sanctae Mariae*.
What is unique to Lydgate—and what may have ensured that his poetry was read alongside such contemplatives as Henry Suso, Adam the Carthusian and Richard Rolle—is the special attention which he pays to the process of reading in the Life of Our Lady.

The vast majority of Lydgate scholarship has tended to focus primarily on his secular works like the Fall of Princes and the Troy Book, while paying little regard to his religious works; this oversight has created a slightly skewed view of the poet. Although Miri Rubin and Eamon Duffy have, in recent decades, drawn attention to the pastoral aims of Lydgate’s religious verses, Nicholas Heale has gone the furthest in arguing for a broader reappraisal of the poet’s work. Viewing Lydgate as a “spiritual director,” Heale sees his work “as a specific response to his own religious life, and as an expression of its pastoral value for individuals,” both lay and religious (60-61). According to Heale, Lydgate accomplishes his aim of helping the laity “to deepen their life of prayer, …especially of liturgical prayer, [by] offering the means to a deeper understanding of what goes on in church” (Heale 63). Such studies help us to remember that Lydgate was not simply a poet who enjoyed the patronage of a broad range of elite members of English society, brought a vast body of Greco-Roman myth into the vernacular, and, above all, remained forever in the shadow of his master Chaucer. Instead, this discussion approaches Lydgate primarily as a deeply religious educator who yoked a distinctly Benedictine approach to literature, which he cultivated both at Bury St Edmunds and at

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4 Love’s work, a translation of pseudo-Bonaventure’s Meditationes, follows its original by adapting material attributed to Jerome’s letter in chapter two of his Mirror. For the construction of Mary as living a quasi-monastic life, see “The Presentation of Mary in the Temple” and “The Marriage of Mary and Joseph” in the N-Town Play.

5 Nicholas Heale notes that Oxford, Bod. MSS Hatton 73 and Douce 322 contain Lydgate’s religious verse alongside texts by these authors in “John Lydgate, Monk of Bury St Edmunds, as Spiritual Director,” 70.

Gloucester College, to an interest in contemporary writing by authors such as Boccaccio and Chaucer. Approaching him as a monastic writer, then, we should not be surprised that the genre in which he composed his best-known works was also a favourite genre among monastic authors—historiography. Similarly predictable should be Lydgate’s intense interest in classical literature as well as his taste for aureate language and rhetorically ornate poetry, both of which were promoted at the Benedictine studium at Oxford, Gloucester College.

Close attention to sacred reading in the Life of Our Lady can help us to develop a fresh understanding of this devotional text and its complex relationship to monastic literary culture. To begin with, Lydgate’s poem demonstrates the renewed interest in devotional reading practices that originated in the monastery, and the Life of Our Lady participates in this return to meditative reading. In this discussion, I will argue that the carefully organized structure of monastic life, particularly the involved programme of monastic lectio, plays a crucial role in shaping the Virgin’s forma vitae as well as the formal structure of Lydgate’s massive poem itself. In addition to the monk’s depiction of Mary as a practitioner of lectio divina, I will consider a variety of the work’s distinctive structural characteristics, which have hitherto received little attention. Such characteristics include meditative passages on the variety of figural images attributed to the Virgin, the division of the work into short segments in order to facilitate a meditative reading of the text akin to lectio divina, as well as a tacit invitation to participate in this reading practice.

7 Recent articles by George Keiser and Phillipa Hardman, which I discuss below, are notable exceptions to this scholarly gap.
My discussion of the *Life of Our Lady* will also consider the poem’s status as a devotional work—symptomatic of the increasingly blurred boundary between lay and monastic piety in later medieval England⁸—intended for secular and religious audiences. Manuscript evidence, such as writing on cover leaves, suggest that Lydgate’s poem was read by diverse lay and clerical audiences in the century after it was written, ranging from the nobility and gentry to the secular and religious clergy.⁹ If we trust the introductory rubric which precedes the list of chapter headings, the *Life of Our Lady* was written “at the excitacion and styryng of our worshipfull prince, kyng Harry the fifth.” Although this rubric, along with the list of chapter headings, appears in only eleven of the forty-two extant copies of the poem,¹⁰ there is no reason to doubt that Henry played some role in initiating Lydgate’s composition given his extensive patronage of pious literature;¹¹ however, even if we do not accept that this poem had a royal commission, it certainly seems to be part of a larger programme of officially sanctioned devotional literature in England. Given that the poem was written at some point between 1415 and 1422,¹² we

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⁸ For an overview of the breakdown of boundaries separating the literary tastes and reading habits of the laity and the religious, see Jill Mann and Maura Nolan’s recent collection of essays entitled *The Text in the Community: Essays on Medieval Works, Manuscripts, Authors, and Readers*.

⁹ In the Duquesne edition of the *Life of Our Lady*, Lauritis provides a thorough description of each manuscript including the names written in each copy; see the “Description of the Manuscripts and Prints” in *A Critical Edition of John Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady* (21-56). Evidence from extant MSS suggests that Lydgate’s poem was read by a broad range of readers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including the following: James Fitzlewis (Durham MS Cosin V. ii. 16); Margareta More and Elizabeth Wyndesor (Hatton MS 73); N. Mawnsell and later Thomas Wilson (Rawlinson Poet MS 140); George Winter, Thomas and Henry Boynton, John Robson, Richard Horff, and John Clarkson (Bodleian MS 75); John Hall Harley MS 1304); Lancelat Welles (Cambridge University MS Kk. 1.3); James Whys and Jon Tynne (Longleat MS); Jamys Benyt (Corpus Christi, Oxford MS 237); Sir Thomas Carne (Venerable English College Rome MS 1306). The MSS also tell us that Lydgate’s poem was read by such clerics as the theologian and archdeacon Richard Tilesly (St. John’s Oxford MS 56) and the esteemed abbot of St. Albans, John Whethamstede (Gonville and Caius, Cambridge MS 230).

¹⁰ It must be noted, however, that although a number of MSS omit either the rubric or the chapter headings, others are simply missing this section of the poem.

¹¹ To be sure, such literature is entirely consistent with what we know about Henry V’s reading tastes. See Krochalis, esp. 66-68.

¹² No satisfactory dating has yet been put forward for the *Life of Our Lady*: J. Parr has argued for a date between 1415 and 1416 while J. Norton-Smith suggests after 1432. Lauritis proposes dates between 1421
may speculate that this text is, at least in part, responding to Archbishop Arundel’s prohibitions on vernacular religious writing, which aimed to control the dissemination of heterodox doctrines associated with the Lollards.\(^{13}\) Equally important, the widespread contemporary interest in a monastic, contemplative form of life afforded Lydgate an opportunity to craft a poem that conveyed to vernacular readers some of the most crucial elements of Benedictine devotional culture: a devotion to meditative reading practices and a firm dedication to the cult of the Virgin Mary. At a point when vernacular religious instruction was highly suspect, Lydgate’s poem, I argue, carefully channels its readers’ spiritual needs safely towards orthodoxy by promoting a reading strategy that encourages a narrow interpretive horizon as well as a cult founded on dogmas that would keep the individual free from contact with heterodox religious doctrine.

Finally, the *Life of Our Lady* provides a glimpse into the highly nuanced set of power relations that existed between religious culture and secular society. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, laypeople had been seeking a more active role in cultivating their own spiritual lives for some time. The rising popularity of the mixed life, a heterogeneous concept without an exact definition, is simply one manifestation of this desire. However, as I shall discuss below, it is this wish to graft elements of religious life onto secular living which explains in part lay interest in monasticism. Increased participation in more demanding devotional exercises was one way that laypeople felt

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\(^{13}\) On the effects of Arundel’s legislation, see Nicholas Watson’s article “Censorship and Cultural Change.” Recently, Vincent Gillespie has argued that this position has been overstated and that upon succeeding Arundel as Archbishop of Canterbury, Henry Chichele sought to take “the English Church in a new direction” (“Vernacular Theology” 416). Part of Chichele’s break from his predecessor’s policies towards include placing “new emphasis on preaching as the primary medium of scriptural instruction” (“Vernacular Theology” 416), a tactic that aimed to remedy concerns about the circulation of English translations of the Bible.
able to enrich their own spiritual lives as well as gain access to more authoritative forms of piety. Vernacular devotion became important to monks because it afforded them an opportunity to reposition themselves both as instructors of the laity and as repositories for an ideal form of Christian living. It is owing to this renewed pastoral initiative that Orders like the Benedictines, theoretically predicated on seclusion and enclosure, willingly adapted elements of their devotional culture in order to make accessible participation in certain practices, such as reading exercises reminiscent of *lectio divina*. Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady* demonstrates implicitly, I argue, that monastic values and practices are crucial for the laity to use in shaping orthodox devotions. What I hope to accomplish, then, is not simply a reconsideration of Lydgate’s *Life of Mary* that enables us to recognize the significant debts which this poem owes to monastic literary culture, but also a reconsideration of Lydgate that appreciates his awareness of contemporary lay piety as well as his astuteness in exploiting it by promoting devotional practices that regulate lay spirituality.

**Benedictine Monasticism and Marian Devotion in Late Medieval England**

Lydgate’s massive Marian epic is, for many reasons, perhaps the most typical of poems one might expect from an East Anglian Benedictine. The *Life of Our Lady* is firmly rooted in a traditionally Benedictine approach to Marian devotion: although it is impossible to locate the origin of each facet of Mariolatry found in the poem, it is, nevertheless, important to recognize just how much of the poem’s spiritual and literary

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14 Katherine Zieman argues this point in reference to laypeople’s desire for greater participation in the liturgy in *Singing the New Song*. 
assumptions originate from within the cloisters of the Black Monks. Summarizing the fundamental characteristics of Marian piety among the Benedictines, Jean Leclercq cites, among others, her honoured and exalted status resulting from her privileged relationship with Christ, a devotion to the joys and sorrows which Mary experienced as the mother of God, a dedication to the praises which the angels rendered to the Virgin, and a special veneration to the mysteries of the Annunciation and the Nativity (Love of Learning, 576-77). Each of these elements of Marian devotion, which Leclercq describes as exhibiting a “certaine sobriété” (Love of Learning, 577), is present in the Life of Our Lady and other religious verses by Lydgate. In addition to these general observations, the Benedictines’ contribution to theological writing on Mary, the proliferation of liturgical texts dedicated to her, as well as the development of an exegetical tradition centred on the Virgin all influenced devotional practices beyond the walls of the monastery and found expression in Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady.

Crucial to the evolution of the cult of Mary during the later Middle Ages is the role played by Benedictine monasticism: by introducing not only a vast body of hymns and prayers to the Virgin but also a number of Marian feasts into the calendar, the Black Monks made significant contributions which affected patterns of Marian devotion. Popular prayers such as the Salve Regina and the O beata et intemerata, initially written for the liturgy or for private use, are simply two of the best-known hymns that originated in the cloisters of the Black Monks before being disseminated through secular

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15 Examples of Lydgate’s religious verses which exhibit some of these characteristics include “The Fyftene Ioyes of Oure Lady,” “The Fifteen Joys and Sorrowes of Mary,” “Ave Maria,” and “Ave Regina Celorum,” all of which may be found in the first volume of the Early English Text Society’s Lydgate: Minor Poems edited by H.N. MacCracken.

16 The former was first sung as an antiphon and the latter in a Benedictine compilation of prayers. For the history of the Salve Regina, see Canal; for the O beata et intemerata, see Bestul 1-5.
communities. This pattern of diffusion was not, of course, uncommon. As Nigel Morgan notes, the Benedictines, along with the Cistercians, were the springs “from which most of the hymns and prayers to Mary flowed into the devotional life of the wider society of the church” (117). As well, Morgan traces the introduction into England of Marian liturgical reforms back to earlier practices of the Benedictines, such as the daily mass of the Virgin, the Little Office of the Virgin, and, more importantly, the introduction of new feasts into the calendar, including the Presentation of Mary in the Temple as well as her Conception (Morgan 120-24). Finally, Benedictines played a significant role in shaping the Catholic Church’s official doctrines on Mary: the theological controversy over Mary’s immaculacy that arose from the introduction of the feast of the Conception as well as the efforts of Eadmer of Canterbury, Osbert of Clare, and Nicholas of St Albans have been especially well documented.18

Benedictine dedication to the Virgin’s cult seems never to have lost popularity within the cloister; rather, it encouraged the spread of Marian devotion through various strata of lay culture. Although restricting her discussion to the popularity of Marian devotion within Benedictine cathedral priories, Joan Greatrex outlines how monastic communities practiced their own form of devotion to the Virgin in terms of liturgical practices as well as pious and theological writings.20 Benedictine Mariolatry was not,

17 For a useful discussion of Benedictine and Cistercian devotion to Mary, see P. Bernard.
18 Useful discussions include those of Bishop, Burridge and Mildner.
19 The cult of Mary in England received further impetus from the growing popularity of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. After receiving a vision in which the Virgin instructed her to build a replica of the house in Nazareth where she received the Annunciation, Richelde de Faverches set to work constructing a wooden reproduction that quickly became a major attraction for pilgrims throughout Europe. For a useful and concise history of the shrine, see Gibson 139-41.
20 Citing the increasing number of Marian feasts throughout the Middle Ages (six in total), the evolution and spread of the so-called “Mary mass” (which was eventually said daily) among Benedictine houses in England, the observance of the “Little Office” and a commemorative office to Mary said each Saturday, Greatrex notes the high esteem in which Mary was held in the liturgical celebrations of the Benedictines, by
however, restricted to the liturgy: it may also be found in the profusion of *miracula*, sermons, expositions and meditations dedicated to the Virgin that flourished within the cloisters of the Black Monks.\(^{21}\)

Another important innovation within Benedictine and Cistercian cloisters is found in the application to the Virgin of scriptural imagery which was formerly applied only to Christ. Nigel Morgan, for example, notes the “monastic preference for symbolic meaning in the figure of the Virgin ... as the woman who fulfilled the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah” (133). Elaborating on this rereading of biblical imagery, Elizabeth Johnson locates the origins of this tendency in monastic meditative reading practices. Within the monastery from the twelfth century forward, following Bernard of Clairvaux,\(^{22}\) scriptural imagery as well as things said directly about Christ were applied to the Virgin.\(^{23}\) This manner of rereading the Bible was, as Johnson points out, certainly aided by monastic reading practices. She notes,

> The habit of contemplation enabled them [the monks] to see through the hard shell of reality to the spiritual core within, with the result that whatever was most admired became a reflection of the Virgin’s beauty: the clear pool was her purity; the mountain shutting off the horizon, her grandeur; the spring flowers her garland of virtue. . . . Furthermore, a multitude of metaphors taken from the Old Testament were applied to her: burning bush, the Ark of the Covenant, the Star of the Sea, the enclosed garden, the blossoming shoot out of the Root of Jesse, the fleece, the bridechamber, the door, the dawn, the ladder of Jacob. (397)

concluding that “her praises were said and sung by all black monks each day” (162). See further Greatrex, “Marian Studies and Devotion” 157-67.

\(^{21}\) Greatrex, “Marian Studies and Devotion” 162-65. For a more detailed discussion of Marian piety within and without of the cloister, see Warner.

\(^{22}\) Although Bernard was a Cistercian, his rereading of scriptural imagery quickly gained currency in Benedictine houses, especially in England. For example, Nigel Morgan points out that in England the earliest extent images of Mary as the Bride of Christ—the *Sponsa-Sponsus* of the Song of Songs—survive only in Benedictine MSS (133).

\(^{23}\) Elizabeth Johnson argues that this turn in the spiritual history of devotion may be traced back to the Marian prayers of Anselm of Canterbury whose praise for her as the “Mother of all recreated things” resulted in a process whereby everything that was new in the world was linked to “her recreative presence” (396). Thus, as Johnson goes on to note, Mary becomes the light that enters the dark world and it is through her fruitful virginity that the stain of original sin is finally cleansed from humanity (396).
So much of what Johnson observes regarding the contemplation of the Virgin as a consequence of monastic meditation or the claustral reading habits in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is still very much present in Lydgate’s fifteenth-century poem. As we shall see, the Life of Our Lady deftly draws on approaches to Marian worship, which stem from traditional meditative reading practices observed in the cloister, that use figural imagery to reflect some attribute of the Virgin.

By the end of the Middle Ages, interest in sacred reading could no longer be confined to the cloister: sacred reading was also practiced widely by lay readers of vernacular texts. John Alford has convincingly argued that Richard Rolle’s English Psalter, written for Margaret Kirkby, is a prime example of the persistence of lectio divina (48). Alford demonstrates how the principles of sacred reading may be used to explain the formal characteristics of Rolle’s English Psalter: by oscillating between the text and a gloss which applies a tropological or personal interpretation of the text, Rolle, argues Alford, reproduces “the alternating rhythm of lectio and meditatio” (53). Such structural patterns facilitate the use of this work as vernacular text for lectio divina. Alford concludes that the English Psalter stands as a “monumental argument” (59) against critics who argue that sacred reading had all but disappeared in late medieval England.

Instrumental in this diffusion of monastic devotional culture was the ever-broadening appeal of private contemplative reading. Near the end of the fourteenth century, religious practices began to shift in their orientation from a communal to a personal encounter with God.24 Owing to the growing body of vernacular devotional literature, religious observances for elite members of the laity became not only more

24 On this gradual shift in practices, see Brown, esp. 202-22.
elaborate as the liturgy continuously expanded but also more focused on the individual’s experience of God. The increasing number of devotional works available also provided the means, as Hilary Carey notes, for English laypeople to participate in a form of the spiritual life characteristic of “the true contemplative” (361). Assisted by the works of Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and Nicholas Love, lay readers were taught how they might take part in the contemplative life, which aimed to provide the individual with a deeper knowledge of God. The most popular of these works (as well as the most theologically conservative), The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ, by the Carthusian monk Nicholas Love, best illustrates how lay people were taught the art of contemplation.

Consisting of a series of devotions based on major episodes in the life of Jesus, Love’s Mirror—which exercised a considerable amount of influence on Lydgate’s Life—furnishes the reader with a sequence of key events or images upon which the reader meditates and prays. Directed at an audience that consisted primarily of “hem þat bene [of] symple vndirstondyng” (Proem 10) who were still new to the devotional reading practices observed in the cloister, the text guides its readers’ meditations on specific events by providing prompts to what they should reflect on, thereby setting strict limits on how the text should be read. Such interpretive regulation may be found early in the text: after the Four Daughters of God resolve their dispute, Love explains that this “processe sal be taken as in liknes & onlich as a manere of parable & deuote ymagination, stirying man to loue god souereynly for his grete mercy to man & his endles

25 For a concise history in this shift in devotional practices, see Carey.
26 Circulated immediately after the publication of Arundel’s Constitutions, Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ was, we are told in the prefatory memorandum, personally examined and thus authorized by the Archbishop himself before its distribution.
27 All quotations from Love’s work are taken from Michael Sargent’s Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ.
gudnes” (19). One of Love’s most effective strategies for stirring his audience toward a contemplative reading of the text—one which Lydgate uses periodically throughout his *Life of the Virgin*—is to apply a subjective moral gloss to the episode. After the angel allays Joseph’s anxieties about taking Mary as his bride, Love addresses his readers directly concerning the virtue of patience, asserting that “[i]n the same manere it shold falle with vs, if we knowþe wele kepe pacience in tym of aduersite...” (34). This interpretive manoeuvre is not unique to the *Mirror*.

Vincent Gillespie notes how clerical authors channel their readers’ desire to participate in elite spiritual exercises by redirecting the traditional monastic focus on reading texts to the reading of images, especially those related to Christ’s Passion in order to regulate the audience’s “spiritual advancement.” In the *Scale of Perfection*, the image replaces reading entirely: dismissing the traditional monastic practices of reading, meditation and prayer as unsuitable for his reader, Hilton instead proposes meditation solely on the image of Christ. The development is also evident in the *Mirror*, which repeatedly invites its readers to picture the most important tableaux of the Passion in order to be stirred “to þe loue of god & desire of heauenly þinges” (10). Such accommodations to the needs of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century audiences are widespread and may be seen as a concession to individuals who, although desiring to participate in some form of devotional reading, lacked either the leisure or the education required by more traditional and intensive forms of meditative reading. However,

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28 See further Gillespie, “Lukynge in Haly Bukes” esp. 9-11.
29 For a lengthier discussion of Hilton’s substitution of image for text, see chapter 15 of *The Scale of Perfection*.
Lydgate departs from these authors who focus on reading images by preserving a strong concern for reading words.

Unlike Love’s *Mirror*, Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady* repeatedly draws attention to reading and the process of reading. Crucial episodes in the life of Mary, which both texts narrate, provide clear evidence for the different approaches each takes towards meditation. When Love narrates events that occur during the Virgin’s girlhood, details are either omitted, as in the case of her love of reading, or simply downplayed, such as her reading at the moment of the Annunciation. As we shall see, Lydgate handles this same material quite differently: in narrating these well-known episodes, the monk of Bury is careful to depict her dedication to a programme of reading, meditation, and contemplation—the same programme Hilton directs his audience away from in the *Scale*, presumably because of their inexperience in contemplative reading as well as their poor Latinity.

Finally, Lydgate’s avoidance of affective piety, which plays such an important role in the *Mirror*, is one of several divergences between his representation of the Virgin and Love’s. Whereas Love’s depiction of the sorrowing Mary descends from the cult of the Mater Dolorosa which, as Eamon Duffy notes, served ultimately “to turn attention to the Christ of the passion” (“Mater Dolorosa” 218), Lydgate’s reserved, desexualized Virgin stems from an entirely different tradition. The Mary of the *Life of Our Lady* seems more closely aligned to a practice of viewing her as an exemplum for virgins and monks. Tracing the origins of this custom back to Athanasius and Ambrose, Hilda Graef notes that this de-gendered portrait of Mary, whose conjugal relationship with Joseph is barely

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30 Love consistently notes Mary’s love of prayer but omits commenting on her reading. When narrating the Annunciation, Love quickly passes over the fact that Mary is reading Isaiah and instead focuses on how she responds to the angel’s salutation.
noted, received its fullest expression within a Benedictine context in Bede’s Advent sermons on Luke (50-56, 163-4). Here, Bede focuses on her daily life and emphasizes her role as an example for those called to the religious life through her humility, chastity and complete dedication spiritual works.\textsuperscript{31} Bury’s library contained Bede’s commentary on Luke’s Gospel,\textsuperscript{32} and even if Lydgate did not know the material at first hand, he would have certainly been familiar with this less well-known tradition of Mary as an exemplum for virgins and monks. Lydgate’s desire to participate in (and, perhaps, breathe new life into) this tradition thus may explain why he chose the Virgin to exemplify his lay monastic poetics as well as his de-gendered representation of Mary, who in this context, is meant to exemplify and promote a humble and chaste life for both religious and lay readers.\textsuperscript{33}

Thus, while Lydgate’s promotion of Benedictine culture would appear to serve as yet another indicator of his perceived backwardness, I would argue that on the contrary he is an innovator who is eager to tap into contemporary trends in devotional literature. Shying away from the more exuberant elements of affective piety embraced by authors such as Love and Kempe, Lydgate instead writes within traditional Benedictine lines. Yet, like his more well-known contemporaries, Lydgate shares their aim of satisfying a burgeoning appetite for devotional literature. Having said that, there is no reason why we

\textsuperscript{31} See Bede’s “Homilia II: In festo visitationis beatae Mariae” (\textit{PL} 94, 15A-15C), especially when he writes, “Prior ergo nobis beatae Dei genitrix ad sublimitatem patriae coelestis iter ostendit humilitatis, non minus religionis, quam castitatis exemplo venerabilis [Therfore the blessed mother of God showed us the way to the sublimity of the heavenly kingdom by the example of her humility, not less of religion than of venerable chastity]” (\textit{PL} 94, 15B, my translation).

\textsuperscript{32} See M.R. James, “Bury St. Edmunds Manuscripts.”

\textsuperscript{33} In the late Middle Ages, Mary’s virginity is almost always emphasized in favour of her status as a married woman. However, one unusual instance were the Virgin’s marriage is emphasised occurs in the N-Town Play, especially in “The Marriage of Mary and Joseph” and “The Trial of Mary and Joseph.” For a discussion of how these performances draw on elements of lay piety to promote orthodox doctrine, see Lipton.
must view him only as either a rigid, backward-looking traditionalist or a literary pioneer receptive to recent developments in lay piety. Intellectual history and particularly religion proceed through a process of innovation through tradition, and this is precisely what Lydgate does by adapting the reading culture and disciplinary structures of Benedictine monasticism for a diverse vernacular public. Indeed, the attention Lydgate pays to reading, while out of step with contemporary authors of devotional literature intended for lay audiences, is one example of the text’s debts to Benedictine culture and, more specifically, to the revival of traditional monastic reading practices at Bury St Edmunds. As well, the emphasis that the poem places on reading devotional literature in a certain way in order to optimize its spiritual efficacy is suggestive of the poet’s desire to promote a reading strategy that confines its readers’ responses firmly within an orthodox interpretive field. If we keep this context in mind, we can see more easily how the Life of Our Lady serves not only as a remarkable work of late-medieval devotional literature but also as a vehicle for exporting to English-speaking audiences devotional practices specific to the Black Monks that carried with them a specific doctrinal agenda.

“To pray and rede, that was euere hir lyve”: Lectio divina and Lydgate’s Virgin

Throughout the Life of Our Lady, and especially in the segments preceding the birth of Christ, Lydgate depicts Mary as embodying (and anticipating) the perfection of monastic life. He accomplishes this task, in part, by creating implicit but clear links between Mary’s reading habits and those practiced within the monastery. His depictions of Mary, who engages in a form of reading reminiscent of lectio divina are significant for a variety of reasons. First, these representations of the Virgin recall the use of monastic lectio as a
tool for individual and collective reformation within the cloister. But, equally 
significantly, such depictions serve to convey to a vernacular audience eager to 
participate in some form of mixed life one of the most crucial elements of Benedictine 
culture—a devotion to meditative reading. By focusing on Lydgate’s representation of 
the Virgin’s reading habits and, to a lesser extent, daily occupations, I will demonstrate 
how the influence of monastic reading and discipline extends beyond the Virgin to shape 
the work as a whole.

Before discussing the Virgin’s reading, I will take a moment to examine the long-
standing tradition of depicting her as a reader. While textual as well as visual 
representations of Mary reading, especially at the moment when she received the 
Annunciation, had existed for centuries, the popularity of this tableau only became 
widespread in the later Middle Ages. Present in the biblical commentaries of Ambrose 
and Bede, the image of Mary reading Old Testament prophecies concerning a virgin 
mother’s birth of a son also appears in a sermon by Odo of Cluny, in which the abbot 
speculates that Mary was reading works of the prophets when she was visited by God’s 
angelic messenger. More chronologically proximate to Lydgate, Aelred of Rievaulx’s 
sermon on the Virgin’s Annunciation recalls explicitly how Mary had Isaiah in her hands 
and was at that very moment reading his well-known prophecy of a son being 
born of a virgin from chapter 7 verse 14. Indeed, Aelred returns to the image of the 
Reading Annunciate again in the “Threefold Meditation” of the De Institutis Inclusarum,

34 See, for example, Ambrose, Expositio in Lucam PL 15, 1639B and Bede, In Lucam, PL 92 318C.
35 Odo of Cluny, Sermo XII: De Assumptione Dei Genetricis Mariae PL 142 1023B-1024C.
36 See Aelred of Rievaulx, “Sermon VIII. In Annuntiatione Beatae Mariae” PL 195 254C-254D.
in which Mary—alone in her room with only her books around her—becomes a *speculum lectionis* (a mirror of reading) who, he states in one sermon, “held Isaiah firmly in her hands had fallen upon that chapter... [Isaiah 7:14].” Finally, this tableau is illustrated in the St Albans Psalter as the Virgin, reading in an aedicule, gazes up in surprise at the descending angel. Such depictions of Mary reading demonstrate that the association of the Virgin with monastic *lectio* was far from unusual by the time Lydgate depicts Mary reading from the book of Isaiah in the *Life of Our Lady*. However, the fact that Lydgate was drawn to this popular image of the Virgin may also be due to the changing attitudes towards monastic reading at his own abbey of Bury St Edmunds.

Despite the more general movement in medieval devotional literature to replace meditating on short segments of text in favour of contemplating images, *lectio divina*, as I noted in Chapter 1, enjoyed a resurgence both inside and outside of the cloister in late-medieval England. The capitular canons of the Benedictines as well as the annals of such prominent abbeys as St Albans all illustrate a return to traditional monastic reading as a tool for spiritual and ethical formation. Evidence for this reversal may also be found at Bury St Edmunds in the form of the *Speculum coenobitarum*—a widely-read disciplinary treatise for novices compiled near the end of the fourteenth century and believed to have

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37 See further Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Rule of Life for a Recluse* in *Aelred of Rievaulx: Treatises and Pastoral Prayer*, esp. 80.
38 On the notion of using visual or ecphrastic images as a mirror of reading, see Humburger.
39 *Sermones Inediti B. Aelredi abbatis Rievallensis*, 85.
40 For a discussion of this image of the Reading Annunciante in the St Albans Psalter as well as the history of this tableau, see Pächt 63-67.
41 For example, the record of Bishop William Alnwick’s visitation to Bardney Abbey in 1437 bears witness to the endurance of the Benedictine commitment to meditative reading—and a conviction of its benefits—in the prescription of reading from the Psalter as a consequence of minor infractions against the *Rule*. See further A. H. Thompson, *Visitations of Religious Houses*, vol. 2 part 1, 22. This remedy was used again in a subsequent visitation to Bardney in 1444; see page 32 in the same volume. As well, in 1439 Abbot John Whethamstede of St Albans applied a similar strategy to curb the laxity of one of the abbey’s daughter-houses. Among the six ordinances prescribed to rehabilitate the discipline of Redbourn Priory, the Abbot urged the monks “to make themselves free for sacred reading” *[vacent... lectioni]* (*Annales* 2.210).
been written by the abbey’s librarian and novice-master, Henry Kirkestede. The first segment of the *Speculum* traces the origins of monasticism from the Old Testament to the Desert Fathers in order to establish the nature of monastic discipline, and the second and third parts comprise a digest of the lives and writings of monastic doctors, which serve as brief *exempla* on how to live out one’s vocation. What is remarkable about this text is the great emphasis that it places on reading as an instrument of the monk’s formation. In cataloguing the various saints and doctors, the compiler emphasises, among other things, the importance of reading, lengthy solitary prayer, and the ability to recall verses from the Bible. This return to traditional monastic spiritual exercises, such as *lectio divina*, as vehicles for interior moral formation may be traced ultimately to Pope Benedict XII’s attempts to reform disciplinary laxity within the Benedictine Order almost a century earlier, and this gesture to the past is present not only in capitular canons and instructional treatises for novices but also in John Lydgate’s massive poem, the *Life of Our Lady*.

Outside the context of the cloister, this return to *lectio* gains additional significance. When targeted for lay consumption, texts that promote reading strategies that evoke the rigorous practice of monastic *lectio* became tools for regulating lay reading. The process by which such control was achieved is far from complex: by encouraging an ethical reading of a text that is redirected onto the individual’s own

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42 For a discussion of Henry Kirkestede and the *Speculum coenobitarum* see Nicholas Heale’s unpublished PhD dissertation *Religious and Intellectual Interests at St Edmund’s Abbey at Bury and the Nature of English Benedictinism c. 1350-1450*.

43 The most significant reforms of the Benedictine Order began in 1336 with the promulgation of Pope Benedict XII’s bull *Summi magistri*, which declared that each house belonging to the Order was to have a master to instruct young monks in the *trivium* and that one out of every twenty members of the community was to be sent to a university. For a discussion of the effects that the pope’s bull had on the order, see Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* 2; 3-28. More recent discussions of this topic may be found in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*. 
ethical wellbeing, meditative reading combats the possibility of disseminating heretical doctrine. An awareness of the potential that this reading strategy could serve for spiritual as well as political ends may also explain why Lydgate, the most esteemed poet of the early fifteenth century, was asked to write this poem in English. Given the little manuscript evidence that survives, Lydgate’s authorship may have further recommended the poem to elite audiences who had read and patronized him in the past, thus ensuring a broad dissemination of its solidly orthodox approach to the Virgin’s life. Mary’s devotion to meditative reading thus forms a major component of the poem’s pastoral function.

Near the beginning of the text, Lydgate relates how Mary, preternaturally “wise and alse sage” in conversation (1.244), not only conforms her life at the early age of five to what the poet explicitly labels as “hir Rull” (1.246) but also engages in a type of reading reminiscent of lectio divina as a favourite pastime. The links between the Virgin’s reading practices and monastic lectio are, perhaps, most clearly articulated when Lydgate tells us that it was “in psalmeʒ, and holy prophecye / To loke and rede, she founde most delyte” (1.428-9). We are told in the following lines that, after reading Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the birth of a child by a virgin (cf. Is 7:14), Mary, wishing to place herself within this narrative by witnessing the occasion, lifts “hir tendre handys” (1.432) and prays that she “myght abyde and see... his Natyvyte” (1.433-34). Finally, the following chapter contains the “seven orysions” (1.438) that Mary prays each day, all of

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44 Lydgate’s patrons range broadly from aristocratic and clerical elites such as Henry V and John Whethamstede to prominent members of the commercial classes such as the trade guilds that patronized a number of his mummings. We also know, based on the small amount of manuscript evidence which exists, that The Life of Our Lady was read by individuals belonging to these different circles. For a fuller discussion of the different individuals who possessed copies of the poem, see the “Description of the Manuscripts” in the Duquesne edition of the Life of Our Lady (21-56).
which petition God to reform her moral conduct further. While Lydgate never explicitly names the process of sacred reading in this passage, the trajectory of Mary’s actions—which proceeds from reading to applying a personal interpretation of the material and, finally, to prayer and contemplation—corresponds almost exactly to the programme of *lectio divina*.

The episode following Mary’s presentation at the Temple, in which Lydgate provides us with some details about the Virgin’s girlhood, contains a brief description of her reading that follows the stages of *lectio divina* even more closely than the one represented in her reaction to Isaiah’s prophecy. After enumerating the Virgin’s many virtues, Lydgate includes two stanzas depicting her dedication to reading and prayer. These lines state,

> To pray and Rede, that was euere hir lyve  
> Off hert wakir, by deuocien  
> To god all way with thought contemplatyf  
> Full fervent euere in hir intencion  
> And Idyll, neuer from occupacion  
> And specially vnto almes dede  
> Hir honde was euere redy at þe need  
> And ful she was, of compassion  
> To rewe on all, that feltyn woo or smert  
> Wel willede euere, with hole affection  
> To euer wyght, so louyng was hir hert. (1. 414-24)

Although these verses do not replicate the exact sequence of monastic reading, they not only portray Mary performing most of the essential activities which comprise *lectio divina*—reading, contemplation and prayer—but they also depict the ethically formative role of meditative reading and the virtuous action arising from it, both of which are fundamental objectives of monastic *lectio*. The collocation of mind, heart, and body,
which is evident in Mary’s “hert wakir,” “thought contemplatyf,” and “hond… euer redy”
recalls the totalizing commitment theorists of monastic reading, such as the Carthusian
Guigo II, envisioned as necessary to engage in lectio divina. In the Scala claus tacticalium,
Guigo similarly envisions how the will of the body and the will of the heart must be
harmonized during sacred reading:

   Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one’s powers on
   it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one’s
   own reason for the knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer is the heart’s devoted
   turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is when
   the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the
   joys of everlasting sweetness. (68, my italics).

The coupling of these qualities—particularly ethical formation and action—is further
emphasised early in the first stanza by parallel phrasing. The constancy of Mary’s devout
thoughts, which were “Full fervent euere in... intencion,” is joined with her unswerving
desire to do charitable works, which keeps her “Idyll, neuer from occupacion.” Although
a causal relationship is never explicitly drawn between Mary’s reading practices and her
temperament and actions, the close proximity of Lydgate’s depiction of the Virgin
reading, with a “hert wakir,” to the account of her pious devotion and charitable work
suggests that Lydgate is, in fact, portraying her behaviour as the result of her monkish
reading.

   Curiously, however, in Lydgate’s description of Mary’s progress through the
stages of contemplative reading he omits any obvious representation of reason. Opting to
describe her intellectual engagement with the text more neutrally as “thought
contemplatyf,” Lydgate may have excluded this detail on account of the fact that Mary,
as a woman, was thought incapable of such reason. However, this omission may also hint
at Lydgate’s tacit agenda of promoting monastic reading as a way of regulating his
audience’s encounter with sacred texts. Eager to channel his readers’ engagement with
the text towards highly subjective and ethical interpretations, Lydgate may have
downplayed the role of reason in this process in order to minimize the potential for
solitary readers to stray very far from an orthodox understanding of the biblical episode.

Moreover, Mary’s choice of reading material, which, as we are told at the
beginning of the following stanza, consists of the “psalmeʒ and holy prophecye” (1. 428),
further emphasises this link with monastic reading practices. Although the Psalter was
widely read by religious and laypeople alike throughout the Middle Ages, its centrality to
monastic culture cannot be overstated. Not only did the psalms serve as the primary
material for monastic lectio, but their ubiquity in monastic life was also ensured by the
fact that they form the basis of the Divine Office, which monks were required by their
rule to sing at intervals throughout the day. Lydgate also mentions, in addition to Mary’s
familiarity with the Psalms, her devout reading of prophetic literature from the Old
Testament, such as Isaiah, as well as her anticipation of the fulfillment of its messianic
prophecies. This interest in prophecy also suggests that the Virgin’s reading habits are
decidedly monastic. Along with other religious orders, the Benedictines cultivated, in
addition to an interest in historiography, a concern with prophecy.45 Indeed, for monastic
readers, the two subjects of history and prophecy were intimately related in several ways:
both were rooted in the Bible, both progressed along eschatological lines, and both were
concerned primarily with the ethical purpose of incidents in history rather than with the

45 For a discussion of the contemporary Benedictine interest in prophecy at Bury, see Heale Religious and
Intellectual Interests at St Edmund’s Abbey 154-66.
events in and of themselves. Thus, Mary’s reading of the prophets and her anticipation of future events in sacred history only underscores the clear association that Lydgate draws between her reading habits and those practised within the cloister.

Lydgate does not represent *lectio divina* as the only link between Mary and contemporary monastic life; indeed, throughout the first book of the *Life of Our Lady*, he carefully aligns the Virgin’s daily routines with those of the (ideally conceived) Benedictine monk. Correspondences between the way in which Mary structures her life and the rhythms of monastic existence are immediately drawn in the text’s second chapter. If we return to Mary’s presentation at the Temple, we can see that Lydgate, in addition to describing her reading practices, also enumerates other virtues of the Virgin that resonate strongly with the spirit of Benedictine monasticism. In one significant couplet, Lydgate epitomizes Mary’s life while simultaneously rendering into English one of the most fundamental passages from Benedict’s *Rule*. Describing her tireless service to God, the poet states that the young Virgin would “neuer sees / To exclude slouthe, and vices to werrey / With handeʒ to werke, or with mought to pray” (1. 229-31). By yoking together these two ideas—the avoidance of idleness and the division of the day between labour and prayer—Lydgate tacitly invokes Benedict’s familiar pronouncement, which begins the forty-eighth chapter of his *Rule*, that “idleness is the enemy of the soul…

46 Such attitudes toward history and prophecy were also shared by the Franciscans. For useful discussions of monastic historiography as well as of the connection between history and prophecy, see Gransden esp. 342-424, Southern, and Reeves.

47 Lydgate’s praise for people who eschew idleness is not, of course, restricted to his religious works. Although in the *Life of Our Lady* his praise for Mary takes on a distinctly Benedictine character, Lydgate praises Prince Henry in the Prologue to the *Troy Book* in language that strongly echoes this passage from the *Life* as he lauds the future king for reading ancient texts to find virtuous exemplars “and also for to eschewe / The cursyd vice of slouthe and ydlenesse” (Prol. 82-83). The differences in the types of reading advised, however, point to a tacit gender divide that may have separated most readers of the *Troy Book* and the *Life of Our Lady*: for aristocratic men, reading about noble deeds in war was an acceptable way to avoid sloth; for pious women such as the Virgin as well the numerous devout men who comprised his audience for that work, spiritual reading is counselled.
[and that] the brothers should have specified periods for manual labour as well as for prayerful reading [lectione divina]” (48.1). Lydgate’s careful echoing of Benedict’s words draws an immediate association between the Virgin and monasticism, but the poet’s allusion to this chapter may have even greater significance for monastic readers. Chapter 48 of the Rule not only contains the lengthiest discussion of monastic reading within the entire text, but it also provides the clearest outline of how a Benedictine ought to divide his day between the two fundamental monastic activities—opus manuum and opus Dei. In other words, by emphasizing Mary’s life of work, prayer, and reading, Lydgate, steeped in the Rule and likely to have instinctively recognized its precepts as the ideal manner in which to structure a virtuous life, points his most astute readers back to Benedict’s instructions for the monk to build one’s life upon these priorities and thus portrays Mary, in a manner characteristic of Benedictine culture, as an exemplar to subsequent contemplatives seeking to evade idleness.

Lydgate further aligns the Virgin’s forma vitae with a life lived in the cloister when he delineates her daily routines in language commonly applied to the monastic horarium. Outlining the custom of “hir Rull” (1.46), Lydgate, following Jacobus de Voragine almost verbatim, maps Mary’s day onto a grid that bears a striking resemblance to the highly structured pattern by which monks organized their daily activities. We are told that from “prime” until the third hour of the day she sits in prayer and from then till noon she performs manual labour, spinning gold, silk, and wool (1.248-

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48 All quotations from the Rule of Saint Benedict are cited by the chapter number of the bilingual Latin / English edition translated and edited by Timothy Fry et al.
49 In The Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Jacobus writes that “the time from dawn to the third hour she devoted to prayer, from the third to ninth hour she worked at weaving, and from the ninth hour on she prayed without stopping until an angel appeared and brought her food” (2: 153). Lydgate adds that after eating she prayed again until evening, perhaps to further emphasize the monastic ordo of her life.
51). After eating, Mary, we are told, returns to prayer until evening. This pattern
 corresponds closely to the routines of monastic life which were codified in late
antiquity.\textsuperscript{50} Moreover, while Lydgate is primarily following the description of the
Virgin’s daily routines in the \textit{Legenda Aurea}, he does make some important alterations in
his amplification of Jacobus’s text. To emphasize the correspondences between Mary’s
practices and monastic routine, Lydgate, for example, translates “mane” as “prime”—the
English being borrowed from the Latin \textit{prima}—the proper name of the second canonical
hour, rather than “in the morning.” Although it was customary to use the canonical hours
to indicate the time of day,\textsuperscript{51} the poet’s choice of liturgical vocabulary strengthens the
association between the Virgin’s regimen with that observed in the cloister. That Mary’s
schedule is indeed monastic is further suggested by its place within Lydgate’s narrative of
the Virgin’s youth. While Jacobus prefaces this episode with a brief description of her
presentation at the Temple, Lydgate places it immediately after his ten-line description of
Mary’s devotion to prayer and work, which so plainly evokes the \textit{Rule} and which appears
nowhere in the \textit{Legenda Aurea}.

Further instances of Mary’s monkish behaviour include her vow, at age fourteen,
to remain a “mayde” for life (1.587), as well as her dedication, following her betrothal to
Joseph, to live a chaste life with five other maids spent in “werke and prayer” (1. 777).
Mary’s commitment to chastity and obedience – ideals fundamental to all monastic
orders – are emphasized throughout the first two books of the \textit{Life of Our Lady}: in

\textsuperscript{50} For example, in chapter 48, Benedict’s \textit{Rule} states that from prime to the fourth hour the monk should be
engaged in manual labour while from then to sext he is to read; after nones, however, the monk is to do
whatever work needs to be done. Of course, the division of the monastic day must not be thought of as
static, since routines were modified in order to accommodate the liturgical year. Such provisions may be
found even in Benedict’s \textit{Rule}: see, for example, chapter 41 on “The Times for the Brothers’ Meals.”
\textsuperscript{51} The definition of “prime” as “early morning or “dawn” is well attested in Middle English and can be
found in Chaucer. However, this fact need not rule out the possibility that Lydgate choose this word
deliberately to strengthen the association I note.
chapter 10 the Virgin “is sett for an ensample of all virginyte,” and in chapter 23 Mary is described not only as the “perfite mayde” (2. 1083) but also as retreating further and further from worldly concerns and pleasures. The poet tells us that as she directed all her thoughts to God, “with hert set so sore / All erthely thyng, she fully dothe dispise” (2. 1091-92). These details, which convey Mary’s dedication to such basic monastic principles as chastity and renunciation of the world, also help the poet to create a certain amount of dramatic tension when the Virgin is compelled to marry Joseph, an act which illustrates her commitment to another monastic value: obedience. Finally, we are told that, after returning to Nazareth following the birth of John the Baptist, Mary remained “in contemplacion” and in “prayere, all waye day by day / With many an holy meditacion” (2. 1068-70). Taken together, these details portray the Virgin more as a type of spiritual director of a small group of religious women who live in a quasi-monastic state of contemplative retreat than as an expectant mother. Again and again Lydgate emphasizes that whether in “prayeng or worchyng” (2.1076) Mary’s thoughts remain fixed on God, and, as a result of her “hooly life” and “high devocian” (2.1082-83), she conforms her will perfectly to God’s, so that no division exists between the two (2.1085). Here, then, the Virgin’s life again mirrors the disciplinary structures of the monk’s, since both practice a number of spiritual exercises, such as fasts, vigils, labours, and reading, in order to achieve a closer union with God.

Perhaps more than any other account of Mary’s life, Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady* reconfigures the Virgin’s youth within a monastic context and thus transforms her into an exemplar of the religious life for audiences inside and outside of the cloister. As we have already noted, Marian devotion was widespread among the Benedictines in England, and

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52 This rubric appears at the head of the chapter in the Duquesne edition.
her numerous feast days as well as her ubiquity within the liturgy of the Divine Office reinforced on a daily basis the high esteem in which she was held. In representing her as one of their own, monastic authors like Lydgate were tapping into the growing cult of the Virgin which remained popular throughout the fifteenth century. Depicting Mary as a model for religious life would also have had a great appeal for lay audiences eager to participate in a more rigorous form of worship that incorporated devotional practices observed in the cloister. The Life of Our Lady thus “solicits,” as Maura Nolan puts it, an elite but diverse imaginary public that included both aristocratic and cloistered readers. Given a readership that ranged from figures as diverse as Abbot John Whethamstede, Margaret More, and Sir Edward Carne, England’s ambassador to the Holy See under the reign of Mary Tudor, it is clear that Lydgate’s text appealed to not only diverse communities but also to individuals experienced in meditative reading practices.

Clearly, Mary’s quasi-monastic life appeals to lay interest in the mixed life, but it is the emphasis which the poem places on reading that distinguishes it from most other vernacular devotional works. Although the manuscript evidence for grounding any detailed speculations on the poem’s audience can only be tenuous, the Life of Our Lady, whether through Lydgate’s or his patron’s intentions, appears to have been intended for audiences eager for sophisticated devotional literature written in the vernacular. Written not long after the English church imposed severe restrictions on such writing, Lydgate’s poem caters to the demand of experienced readers for contemplative literature in the way that Love’s Mirror caters to “symple soules.” In providing lay readers with access to a

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53 On Lydgate’s construction of diverse imaginary publics to which he directed his texts, see Nolan 4.
54 For a more detailed list of this text’s readers, see note 9. Thomas Carne’s name is written in Venerable English College Rome MS 1306, but Lauritis speculates that this name may either refer to Edward Carne or to one of his kinsmen.
richer devotional life, both texts, however, were able to circumvent official prohibitions against such works in English by promoting a severe and rigidly orthodox form of piety.

A Formal Look at Mary’s Life: Monasticism and the Structural Characteristics of the Life of Our Lady

The monastic devotion and dedication to contemplative reading that the Virgin practises is mirrored in a variety of ways by the formal characteristics of the poem. A challenge to generic taxonomy, the Life of Our Lady, as W.F. Schirmer noted long ago, is “not a vita and not an organic unity” but rather a “mosaic... of hymns, prayers, sermons, fragments of narrative, didactic digression, and detailed descriptions” (151). Conceding this apparent lack of cohesion, Derek Pearsall describes the poem more generally as an “incomparable flowering of devotional poetry” (285). In addition to the immense popularity of Lydgate’s Life, attested to by the forty-two extant manuscripts, scholars have long since recognized the importance of this text as a masterpiece of English devotional literature. Recent discussions, however, have focused on how the formal characteristics of the poem facilitate the type of contemplative reading which Mary is seen to be engaged in. The work of George Keiser and Phillipa Hardman has been especially important for furthering our understanding of how the structure of the poem caters to the devotional interests of its readers.

55 The high number of extant manuscripts of The Life of Our Lady seems even more remarkable when one considers that Lydgate’s other (and more widely discussed) major poems survive in far smaller numbers: the Troy Book exists in twenty-three manuscripts and fragments while the Siege of Thebes survives in twenty-nine manuscripts.
In his study of the *mise-en-page* of Lydgate’s text in extant manuscripts of the *Life of Our Lady*, Keiser notes how the *ordinatio* of material on the page, its division into discrete sections in order to provide easier access to authorities, is designed to facilitate a meditative reading of specific passages of the poem.\(^{56}\) Following Nicholas Love’s *Mirror*, which divides the narrative of Christ’s life into distinct units to be read at certain canonical hours, Lydgate’s poem divides Mary’s life into six books which narrate her birth, her youth and betrothal to Joseph, Christ’s nativity, the circumcision, the Epiphany, and her Purification and may be read in conjunction with certain liturgical feasts throughout the year. Moving from lengthy narratives containing multiple plot threads to single books recounting self-contained narratives rooted in the liturgical calendar, the poem’s material is further subdivided into eighty-seven chapters. Although neither programmes of book or chapter divisions appear to be authorial,\(^ {57}\) such partitions in the text allowed the reader “seeking direction for meditation on the events of that life and… the meaning of those events” to approach the poem with greater ease (Keiser 151). In his conclusion, Keiser further claims that Lydgate, also like Love, intended the text to serve as a work to which devout readers “might resort for meditation… on its abundance of images and paradoxes, its exploration of sacred mysteries and favourite devotional subjects, and its presentation of an ‘ensaumple clere’ of virtue and nobility in the life of the Virgin” (157).

\(^{56}\) For a survey of the development of *ordinatio* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and its impact on the medieval patterns of reading, see Parkes.

\(^{57}\) In his discussion of the MSS containing the *Life of Our Lady*, Keiser argues that the chapter divisions in the poem must be scribal on the basis that no “logic governs any of the alternative programs of chapter-divisions, in which chapter breaks sometimes disturb the context or even occur in mid-sentence” (150-51). However, Keiser suggest that the six-book structure “seems more likely to have been Lydgate’s own, in part because the manuscript evidence for it is more abundant” (150).
More recently, Phillipa Hardman has extended this discussion of the poem’s formal divisions by arguing that the structure of the *Life of Our Lady* suggests that Lydgate changed the direction of the work midway through the poem’s composition. Despite the discrepancy in length between books 1 to 3 and 4 to 6 as well as the fact that the final three books are dedicated to single narratives in the Virgin’s life—both points suggestive of a restructuring of the narrative—Hardman argues that the most significant division in the text is not between books 1 to 3 and 4 to 6 but between books 1 to 2 and 3 to 6. Whereas the first two books comprise a complex sequence of events that often weaves seemingly extraneous material within the primary narrative, the remaining four books describe events that are clearly tied to the liturgical calendar. Moreover, Hardman asserts that at the end of book 2 Lydgate’s poetic persona changes radically. Although hitherto presenting himself as a “self-conscious poet, shaping his material in accord with principals of artistic design,” Lydgate represents himself, from the third book forward, more as a “teacher or spiritual guide, interpreting, explaining, and leading in prayer” (252). The former persona Hardman locates “firmly in the Chaucerian narrative tradition” (252) and sees Lydgate’s movement away from it as coinciding with his eulogy of Chaucer. She does not, however, specify to what tradition the latter persona belongs. Here, I would suggest that Lydgate adopts a role similar to that of a leader of a community, a position which he did eventually occupy as prior of Hatfield Regis, whose primary interest would lay in the spiritual development and wellbeing of those in his care. Such speculation seems even more likely in light of Hardman’s further argument that the last three books of Lydgate’s Marian epic were directed primarily towards a monastic

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58 For Lydgate’s eulogy to Chaucer in the *Life of Our Lady* see 2. 1628-69.
audience. Such observations not only reinforce the likelihood of a mixed lay and religious audience but also illustrate the sophistication of Lydgate’s life of Mary. Readers who enjoyed this work were undoubtedly quite familiar with the art of contemplative reading, and the broad appeal, previously noted, that the Life enjoyed among both monastic and lay audiences may be taken as one indication of its successful packaging of monastic devotional traditions in a vernacular work.

However, while both Keiser and Hardman discuss how the ordinatio as well as the internal structure of the Life of Our Lady reflect the contemplative manner in which it was intended to be read, attention also must be paid to how the poetry itself, which is all that we can know for certain originated with Lydgate, is indicative of a distinctively monastic set of literary assumptions. Unlike Love’s Mirror, which directs its reader through a contemplative, affective reading of Christ’s life with a very heavy hand, the Life of Our Lady works far more subtly. A significant element of the poem’s ingenuity is the manner in which its poetry tacitly reflects patterns of monastic reading. Most immediately, at the start of the poem, Lydgate’s lyrical meditation on various images taken from the Old Testament and applied to Mary exhibit traces of a distinctly monastic reading psychology, originating in a methodical attention to the text.

The quality of Lydgate’s verses describing the Virgin, which has not gone unnoticed, led the editors of the Duquesne edition to gather the various passages into an appendix and prompted Keiser to draw attention to how they encapsulate recurrent

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59 Among the evidence Hardman cites as proof that the latter books were written for claustral readers is Lydgate’s restrictive address to “thy men” (3.1806, 5.629) in the communal prayers at the end of books 3 and 5, his incorporation of allusions to the devotional cults of the Madonna lactans and the Holy Name, which were especially popular among religious men and women, as well as a prayer to the Virgin to aid the monastic community (See Life of Our Lady 5.629-30; Hardman 259).
themes in the poem. However, what has hitherto escaped the attention of scholars is the relationship of Lydgate’s imagistic ruminations to a monastic reading psychology. The multistage programme of lectio divina facilitated, according to Jean Leclercq, the phenomenon of “rumination and reminiscence” (Love of Learning, 75) which occurred while the monk encountered the words on the page. The “deep impregnation” of language from the Bible and other sacred texts that results from lectio divina produces “the extremely important phenomenon of reminiscence whereby the verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously evoke quotations and, in turn, a scriptural phrase will suggest quite naturally allusions elsewhere in the sacred books” (Love of Learning, 73). Similarly important is the significant effect this psychology of reminiscence had on literature composed in the cloister. Upon hearing a particular word with a strong resonance, Leclercq notes, the monk recalls a passage from the Bible which, in turn, triggers another recollection, thereby initiating a “chain reaction of associations” (Love of Learning, 74). It is owing to this cognitive pattern that monastic literature may often seem to lack an entirely coherent shape. Many monastic authors, Leclercq notes further, that “do not always compose after a logical pattern which has been definitely fixed upon in advance… The plan really follows a physiological development, determined by the plan of associations, and one digression lead to another or even to several others” (Love of Learning, 74). However, despite the appearance of incoherence,

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60 See Appendix B in the Duquesne edition of the Life of Our Lady for a list of Lydgate’s various descriptions of the Virgin (227-33), and Keiser, “Ordinatio in the Manuscripts of John Lydgate’s Lyf of Our Lady” 156-57.
61 A similar tendency to draw connection between various episodes in the Bible was also encouraged by the liturgy itself. At different points in the liturgy, individual verses from the Psalms would evoke episodes in the Gospels. As well, the liturgy used during Advent would also evoke narratives from the Passiontide. Such readings of liturgical texts demonstrate that for the monks who practiced lectio and sang the liturgy throughout the day the Bible became a complexly and dynamically interconnected web of associations that was constantly capable of yielding in meanings.
digressive meditations in monastic literature, which are so characteristic of, for example, St. Bernard’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, are always linked by some “hook,” as Leclercq dubs it, that returns them to their central theme. Although Leclercq’s study focuses primarily on monastic writing from the high Middle Ages, these distinctive patterns of monastic composition, which generate chains of associations as well as numerous digressions, are also present at the end of this period in Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady*.

Sharing a number of traits with what Leclercq ascribes to the phenomenon of reminiscences that distinguishes monastic literary compositions, Lydgate’s initial meditation on the Virgin signals the significant role meditative reading will play in this text. Indeed, just as the narrator’s reflections on the Virgin form the core of the opening chapters, the poem’s first lines frame the *Life* within a highly allegorized landscape. Alone in his cell, the speaker cannot get to sleep. We are told that his heart is distressed by the “slombre of slouthe” (1.2), and it is at this point that he looks up and sees a star shining above, which initiates the proceeding meditation. On the most literal level we are presented with a portrait of a monk unable to sleep out of concern for his own spiritual wellbeing. The situation quickly changes, however, when he begins to contemplate the light shining from a star above. This initial episode which describes the sleepless and distressed monk recalls the complaints of many restless speakers familiar to the dream vision but bears particular comparison to the Prologue of Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes*. Both poems begin with the same generic marker of the courtly dream vision but then completely diverge. Hoccleve’s speaker complains that his anxiety about the mutability of the world (and the instability of his own income) have left him unable to
sleep, thus linking the poem as well to a tradition originating with Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. Lydgate, in contrast, moves quickly in a devotional tradition. Given the concerns of these poems, this deviation comes as little surprise. Hoccleve’s experiences in the Privy Seal, which left him subject to lengthy bouts of poverty and mental illness, often filter into his largely autobiographical poetry as well as the political and philosophical concerns taken up in the *Regiment*. Writing from the cloister, Lydgate’s concerns lay elsewhere. While it cannot be know for certain whether this gesture back to a genre employed by a shared poetic “master” is a strategy of Lydgate’s for adapting material to a specific set of lay readers, it may indicate that the readers of the *Life* are the same as those who read Chaucer and Hoccleve and who would have recognized such motifs as familiar.

Not simply a poetic distraction from his immediate concerns, these first musings function as a prompt for meditation: reflection on the image of the star as a figure for the Virgin triggers a chain of associations and allusions which leads the poet out of his spiritual malaise. In this prolonged meditation on commonplace metaphors applied to Mary, which include the extended use of astral, floral, and horticultural imagery, Lydgate uses each figure as a vehicle to convey something unique about Mary’s role in humanity’s salvation. Indeed, this chain of imagery draws on a number of distinctly monastic reading habits, such as the re-reading of biblical imagery as figures for the Virgin, as well as the formation of a spontaneous chain of associations.

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62 Indeed, each poem contains a eulogy to Chaucer whom both describe as their poetic “master” (see *Regiment* 2078-2107; *Life* 2. 1628-69).

63 While we cannot know for certain that these works, composed roughly contemporaneously (*Regiment* 1410-13; *Life* 1415-22) were read by the same individuals, we do know that at least one person was supposed to read both texts: Henry V. Hoccleve’s poem is intended as an appeal to Prince Henry and Lydgate’s may have been commissioned by him.
In a manner familiar within the cloister, Lydgate re-reads Old Testament prophecies traditionally applied only to Christ and appropriates them for the Virgin. In the prologue, for example, the Virgin is described as the “fayrest sterre” of Jacob (1.31), prophesied by Balaam in Numbers (Num 24:17) and, shortly thereafter, as a star whose streams “oute of Iesse ronne... [w]ith light of grace, to voiden all our tene” (1.45-49). While standard glosses read these words as messianic prophecies foretelling the Incarnation, Lydgate, following trends established within Benedictine and Cistercian cloisters (see E. Johnson esp. 406), reads their fulfillment in Mary rather than Christ. While such interpretive moves were, by the late Middle Ages, hardly innovative, the significance of Lydgate’s verse lies in the role it plays in popularizing forms of Marian devotion originating from within the cloister among a vernacular lay audience.64

In addition to Lydgate’s re-readings of commonplace biblical metaphors, the succession of them is also typical of the chain of associations which tended to result from monastic reading practices. The narrator’s meditation on Mary as a “flour of vertue” (1.64) in the first chapter provides an example of how the associational patterns formed from monastic reading, which Leclercq labelled the phenomenon of reminiscences, are present in the Life of Our Lady. In this lengthy opening chapter, Lydgate cycles through a number of botanical figures commonly applied to the Virgin, which include Mary as the root of Jesse (1.67), a flower in an enclosed garden (1.73), the flower of Nazareth—more “Ryall” than those of Africa (Scipio) or of Rome (Caesar) (1.78ff.), the white lily (1.107),

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64 For examples such readings originating from within Benedictine and Cistercian cloisters, see especially Anselm of Canterbury “Prayer to St. Mary, to ask for her and Christ’s love” 120-121. Perhaps the most comprehensive re-reading of Old Testament prophecies onto the Virgin may be found in St. Bernard’s “De laudibus beatae Mariae—Homily 2,” where he describes her as “that noble star risen out of Jacob whose beam enlightens this earthly globe... whose brightness both twinkles in the highest heaven and pierces the pit of hell... cauterizing vice” 30-31.
the sweet rose (1.108), the violet (1.110), and, to conclude the chapter, the very “floure of womanhede” (1.182). Not simply inserting this imagery into the poem as rhetorical ornamentation, Lydgate draws upon each of these well-known metaphors to in order to convey some crucial facet of the Virgin’s role in salvation history, which would have been immediately apparent to the poet’s contemporary audience.

At the end of the first chapter, having ruminated on a series of well-known Marian metaphors, the narrator returns to the beginning of the poem, which begins with a meditation on the Virgin as a radiant star in the dark night. The cyclical movement of these opening verses, in which reflection on one image generates another and in which there is almost no narrative progression, owes a great deal to the phenomenon of reminiscences which was the consequence of traditional monastic meditative reading practices. The poem begins by walking the reader through a chain of associations such as could be made by a reader who was accustomed to monastic reading: opening with such a prolonged reflection so highly evocative of the rigorous patterns of monastic thought is a clear indication that the Life of Our Lady is meant to be read and meditated upon.

Incorporating more popular as well as more accessible elements of devotional literature, Lydgate manipulates the distinctive hallmarks of monastic reading by attaching

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65 Almost all of these metaphors for the Virgin were used by Lydgate repeatedly in a small number of Marian poems, including the “Ballade at the Reverence of Our Lady, Qwene of Mercy,” “The Fyftene loyes of Oure Lady,” “The Fifteen Joys and Sorrows of Mary,” “Ave Maria,” “To Mary the Star of Jacob,” “To Mary the Queen of Heaven,” “The Image of Our Lady,” “Ave Regina Celorum,” and especially “Ave Jesse Virgula.”

66 Within the context of the monastery, virginity, notes Johnson, was a particularly significant subject of meditation: as Our Lady, Mary “functioned for the monk as the spiritual counterpart of the worldly knight’s lady, to whom he pledged his enthusiastic and honourable service and love” (397). The imagery that Lydgate employs—the lilies and roses that represent her as the “floure of womanhede”—emphasize her beauty as well as her chastity, rendering her as an image of idealized (monastic) femininity to which the monk may direct his petitions. Of course, this type of Marian piety was not restricted to the cloister. In addition to the large quantities of visual art produced depicting different aspects of Marian piety, major feast days commemorating important events in her life as well as the performance of liturgical dramas played an important role in dispersing Marian devotion. On the forms of Mariolatry in fourteenth-century private piety, see Johnson 406-410.
subjective glosses to certain highly resonant images in the life of Mary. The poet’s procedure for applying such glosses is nowhere more apparent than in his meditation on the gifts of the Magi. At this point the poet appears to take us through the various stages of *lectio divina*. Lydgate’s ruminations on the three gifts of the Magi are not simply moralizing glosses on familiar images. Here the poem invites the reader to place himself or herself into the narrative in order to achieve some measure of moral rehabilitation—a process and aim which bears a strong resemblance to *lectio divina*.

Assuming the role of guide for the reader’s journey through another contemplative exercise, Lydgate proceeds through the different stages of a monastic reading after signaling to the reader the importance of this chapter within his larger retelling of the Epiphany. Expanding significantly on Matthew’s brief narrative of the Magi’s encounter with Christ, Lydgate begins with a prayer that Christ “defende vs fro all aduersite” (5.549) on account of the courage of the three kings who “for thy loue token her viage” (5.548). In addition to this introductory prayer, the chapter’s status as distinct from those within the book as whole is suggested by its introductory rubric: “A notable declaracion of these iij gyfteʒ of the iij kynges.” Rubrics which precede other chapters in the book restrict themselves to conveying the most essential details of the plot, whereas here the focus is directed towards Lydgate’s commentary on the gifts. Moreover, the roman numerals which mark the chapter number, in this case lxxx, have been crossed out with no other number replacing it: such excision is highly suggestive and may indicate that the chapter was read independently and often removed from the

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67 The visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus is told in the second chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. The biblical account of the presentation of the gifts is limited to one verse in that Gospel: “And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (2:8).
narrative in order to put it to other devotional uses. Finally, this chapter contains an inordinate amount of glossing. The same emphatic comment, *nota bene nota*, appears seven times in the margins—the only other chapter to contain such a flourish of marginal directives to *note well* is the previous chapter, a lengthy meditation on the humility of Our Lady. While we can only speculate whether there was any authorial intention to set this segment off from the rest of the narrative, this passage appears designed to be read apart from the larger narrative of the Epiphany, just as we know Lydgate’s vernacular rendering of the *magnificat* and the *nunc dimittis* had been.\(^{68}\)

Again, while moralizing glosses are hardly unique to monastic authors, Lydgate’s digression upon the gifts of the Magi does seem to mirror the standard progress a monk would make when contemplating a passage of text as *lectio divina*. To accomplish this task (and assist the reader) the imagery is removed from the context of the story so that a more subjective interpretation of the images may follow. There is no mention of the kings bestowing their gifts upon the infant Christ; instead, the narrator, speaking directly to his audience but careful not to appropriate the voices of the Magi, emphasizes that this is “our golde” (5.554), “our franke” (5.58), and “our myrre” (5.577). The gifts of the Magi are then given a moral gloss: the gold, like the gifts of frankincense and myrrh, is supplied with a range of meanings, each one denoting some ethical quality, such as “perfye charite” (5.554), “trouthe” (5.561), “faythe and stablonesse” (5.585) and simply “loue” (5.607). In addition to such pointers encouraging a personal interpretation, the immediacy of the narrative is brought home in the opening line of the chapter, which locates the events of “this high feste” as occurring on “this day” (5.540), thus suggesting the poem’s function as a text to be read in conjunction with the liturgy.

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\(^{68}\) See, for example, Keiser, *Ordinatio in the Manuscripts* 154.
biblical history with the liturgy, Lydgate then places his readers in the narrative by imploring them to present the “golde of loue, the franke of Innocence, / And the chast myrre of clene entencion” to Christ as “our oblacion” (5.607-9, my italics). Finally, as Lydgate progresses through his interpretation of the gifts we are constantly reminded that his reading is, in fact, a prayer. Christ is continuously implored to help the readers amend their lives, to “make amyrrour of his awne mynde... / To se his fauteʒ that he shulde well fynde” (5.597, 600). The arrangement of the text and its structural patterning which encourages a subjective application of the poem both suggest, then, that this chapter was a set piece meditative exercise whereby the narrator walks the reader methodically through the stages of the systematic reading programme observed in the cloister. Although subjective interpretations of biblical episodes are common in the period, particularly in the affective piety exhibited by Margery Kempe, Lydgate’s promotion of this reading strategy through strictly textual media is characteristically monastic.

Whereas the formal structure of lectio divina moves from literal reading through assimilation by way of subjective interpretation to prayer and finally to the individual’s moral rehabilitation, Lydgate’s meditation on the three gifts combine these different elements as his excursus on the text moves through the various stages of lectio, though in no overly systematic order. This absence of order is not, however, unusual for monastic reading. Hugh of St. Victor, for example, writes that it “delights to range along open ground, where it fixes its free gaze upon the contemplation of truth” (3.10). What we can see in Lydgate’s verse is not so much an attempt to walk the reader clumsily through a meditative reading of this biblical narrative but a more sophisticated poetic expression of how one might meditate upon this text from within the cloister. Instead of mechanically
following a rigid programme, Lydgate, I would suggest, is doing what comes naturally to him, given his training in the cloister. Indeed, it is tempting to suppose that what we read is, in some way, the fruit of the poet’s own meditative encounter with this brief episode in Matthew’s Gospel.

**Conclusion: Lydgate’s Monastic Poetics**

With the continued growth of the cult of Mary in England and with the increasing restrictions placed on vernacular renderings of biblical narratives, demand for such an elegant rendering of the Virgin’s life as Lydgate’s was, quite naturally, high. Tapping into contemporary trends in Marian piety, which ranged from the exaltation of her purity and concern for sinners to the application of prayers and meditations to her Joys and Sorrows, the *Life of Our Lady* achieves an almost encyclopedic breadth in its incorporation of various facets of devotion to the Virgin. More importantly for this discussion, the poem also draws upon both the devotional tastes of elite Black Monks and the desire of literate laypeople to achieve a more personal encounter with God through the aid of a growing body of (authorized) vernacular devotional literature. Keiser and Hardman have noted that Lydgate’s poem would have facilitated devotional readings by pious readers. While such observations have increased our understanding of the poem, scholars have not hitherto acknowledged just how deeply indebted the *Life of Our Lady* is to the traditions of monastic literary culture. Lydgate’s construction of Mary as an exemplary figure of monastic life through, among other things, her devotion to work and

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69 Lydgate’s “Fyftene Ioyes of Oure Lady” and “Fifteen Joys and Sorrows of Mary” participate in this tradition. For a useful discussion of this facet of Marian piety, see Eamon Duffy, “Mater Dolorosa, Mater Misericordiae.”
prayer as well as her choice of reading material gives one indication of this great debt.

Other suggestions of the poem’s participation within a distinctively monastic literary tradition come in the form of the meditations scattered throughout the text that are highly evocative of a monastic reading psychology, what Leclercq labels the “phenomenon of reminiscences,” borne out of the formalized reading patterns practiced within the cloister. The inclusion of such sophisticated narrative layering may also account for the popularity of the *Life of Our Lady* among even the most elite members of the English Black Monks.\(^{70}\)

While there can be little doubt of Lydgate’s conscious efforts to incorporate different elements of Benedictine reading culture into his religious verses, it is equally important to consider this unique facet of Lydgate’s corpus in a broader historical context which takes into account the position of the Benedictine Order and its struggle to re-establish its position within (and relevance to) English culture in general. By the late Middle Ages the reputation of the Black Monks in England had been substantially diminished by an increasing laxity in their observation of regular life. The slackening of monastic discipline, which Chaucer’s Monk neatly epitomizes, continued into the fifteenth century and, as criticisms arose in both lay and ecclesiastical circles, the negligence of the Black Monks eventually became a cause for concern of the king.\(^{71}\)

Indeed, after returning to England in 1421 from a four-year absence in France, Henry V launched a programme to reform the Benedictine Order in England. In a letter to Lydgate’s own Abbot, Henry proposed an extraordinary meeting at Westminster in which

\(^{70}\) Evidence for its broad appeal may be found, for example, in the commonplace book (Caius MS 230) of John Whethamstede, the renowned abbot of St Albans and patron of Lydgate, which contains his client’s English rendering of the *Magnificat* from the *Life of Our Lady*.

an assembly of Black Monks consisting of sixty abbots and conventual priors, as well as
over three hundred brothers, would gather to discuss, as he writes less than ten days later
to the presidents of the Order, “certyn matiers chargeable concernyng the worshipe of
God as wel as the goode of youre ordre.”72 To speed this process along, Henry presented
the convocation with thirteen articles that, while far from proposing any radical reforms,
requested a stricter observance of the Rule.

Immediate events that occurred in this period (the first years of the 1420s) are also
significant because it is at this time that the Life of Our Lady is thought to have been
composed, as its introductory rubric specifies, “at the excitacion and styyryng of our
worshipful prince kyng Harry the Fifthe.”73 While Henry’s awareness of Lydgate’s
talents may be traced to the monk’s days at Oxford,74 the coincidence between the king’s
initial patronage of the Life to a Benedictine poet and his attempts to renovate the oldest
monastic Order in England ought not to be overlooked. Although much scholarly debate
has focused on the poet’s status as a “propagandist” for the Lancastrian court,75 Lydgate,
with this massive Marian epic, approaches the role of apologist for Benedictine
monasticism. In The Life of Our Lady, Lydgate’s promotion of meditative reading as well
as of the exemplary model of the Virgin’s piety may respond to Henry’s call for the

72 The full text of Henry’s letters to the Abbot of St Edmunds and the presidents are reprinted in Pantin,
Documents 2: 104-105.
73 Lauritis notes that this rubric appears in at least 11 of the MSS (240). Although debate continues as to the
exact date of the poem’s composition, Lauritis, in his introduction to the text, dates the production of the
text between 1421-22 based on astronomical allusions which appear in Book IV in lines 1-11 (9). As well,
the Troy Book, composed between 1412-20, likely overlaps the composition of the Life of Our Lady which
also claims Henry as its patron.
74 Between 1406 and 1408, the Prince of Wales, later Henry V, wrote to Abbot Curteys of Bury St
Edmunds in order to secure Lydgate’s continued residence at Oxford University (See Pearsall, Lydgate
29).
75 For a discussion which interrogates the commonplace notion of Lydgate as a Lancastrian propagandist,
see Scott-Morgan Straker, “Propaganda, Intentionality, and the Lancastrian Lydgate.”
Order to return more closely to the original spirit of the monastic vocation.76 The composition of such a work, which so effectively promoted pastoral aims of the English Church, may imply resistance to the king’s pejorative account of the state of Benedictine monasticism by demonstrating the ability of the Black Monks to produce literature that powerfully advances the edifying effects of prayerful reading while simultaneously exalting monastic life. Such a complex response that fuses compliance with and resistance to the demands of the monarch occur elsewhere in Lydgate’s poetry. Lee Patterson has argued that the poet deploys a similar strategy in The Siege of Thebes. Likely written between 1420 and 1422 (nearly contemporaneous with the Life of Our Lady), the Siege is often read as “an admiring commentary” on the king’s recent campaign in France: yet, Patterson argues, when one considers the poem’s relationship to Lancastrian foreign policy, Lydgate’s use of the Theban legend, which emphasized the morally deleterious effects of war and which questioned claims related to the transmission of authority that maintained medieval monarchy, “challenge[s]” Henry’s militarism as well as its damaging affects at home (96). Patterson also suggests that such strategies of resistance towards royal authority are present in the writing of other Benedictine authors as well. Citing the sermons of John Paunteley, a doctor of theology and alumnus of Gloucester College (see Haines 86), Patterson argues that they serve as an “analogue” to the Siege (94): while ostensibly praising Henry’s virtues and desire to intercede in Benedictine affairs, Paunteley directs his audience to past figures of religious living that exemplify, as Patterson notes, “neither spiritual fortitude nor meditative transcendence but... political resistance to presumptuous monarchs” (95). Although

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76 For discussions of Henry’s attempts to reform the Benedictine Order in England, see Wylie 3: 283-85, and Allmand 277-79.
nowhere as overtly as ironic as Paunteley, Lydgate operates in a similar vein, in that his appropriation of Mary to exemplify the religious vocation may also serve as a challenge to Henry’s perception of the Order and attempts to place the Benedictines under his regal authority.\textsuperscript{77}

Although the pressure on Lydgate to exercise great caution when commenting on royalist politics by, for example, carefully encoding his messages in mythological allusions has meant that his poetry’s engagement with contemporary issues is often difficult to detect, the \textit{Life of Our Lady} is not the first instance in which Lydgate uses his poetry as a medium to involve himself in ecclesiastical politics. Indeed, the issue of royal incursion on ecclesiastical authority resurfaces in a number of poems such as his “Ballade to King Henry VI upon his Coronation,” which admonishes the young monarch to cherish the church, and his prayers to St Edmund and St Thomas Becket, both of which are represented as defenders of ecclesiastical authority against imperious secular powers. Perhaps most explicit is Lydgate’s \textit{Cartae versificate}, a versified charter of the liberties of St. Edmunds bestowed on it by a succession of four monarchs that was commissioned by his Abbot, William Curteys. Comprising four separate segments—the charters of Cnut, Hardecanute, Edward the Confessor and William I—the \textit{Cartae} not only documents the claims of the abbey openly in the vernacular but also repeatedly emphasizes, as Nigel Mortimer notes, the “unalienable nature of the [abbey’s] privileges” (149) and testifies “to a keen interest in the protection of spiritual authority” (150) both on the part of the abbey and the poet. Nowhere nearly as explicit as these poems, many of which where commissioned by ecclesiastics, Lydgate’s \textit{Life of Our Lady} may work

\textsuperscript{77} While the Benedictines resisted Henry’s attempts at reforming their Order, a considerable amount of support for the king existed among the Black Monks with regard to his campaign against the Lollards. See Horner.
towards similar ends. Indeed, such a careful redeployment of religious culture as one sees in the *Life* may have served as a measured response to Henry V’s desire to reform the Benedictine Order in England by demonstrating the useful pastoral role Benedictine culture could still play beyond the cloister through religious verse.78

Against the backdrop of contemporary history and Lydgate’s own literary sensibilities, it is not surprising the *Life of Our Lady* enjoyed such popularity. Lydgate’s poem deftly balances the twin pressures of Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions, which placed strict limits on the production of vernacular devotional literature in the fifteenth century, and the Benedictine Order’s attempts to defend and re-assert its own beleaguered religious and intellectual authority within English culture, in part through pastoral initiatives. More than simply catering to the laity’s interest in the cult of the Virgin Mary or satisfying its demand for devotional literature, the *Life* draws on the rich devotional heritage of the cloister in order to promote orthodox forms of lay piety. Seen in this light, Lydgate’s adaptation and dissemination of monastic practices become strategic: although Lydgate seems to encourage a slight blurring of boundaries between his lay and religious audiences, the return to traditional meditative reading which the text promotes becomes a useful instrument for channelling lay spirituality comfortably towards orthodoxy.

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78 Even though the pastoral role the Benedictines had occupied in the past had, over time, diminished, the Black Monks continued to exercise an important presence throughout England. Such prestigious houses St Albans in Hertfordshire and Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk played a prominent and visible role in the daily lives of people living within the liberty of these abbeys. The abbot of Bury, for example, exercised, in part, the authority of bishop and king in Suffolk by enjoying a range of episcopal powers (such as the privilege of choosing bishops and ordaining priests) and regal powers (such as the power to exclude royal officials and appoint judges to the court). For a brief though highly informative discussion of an abbot’s place within an often hostile community, see Nigel Mortimer’s examination of William Curteys’s struggles against secular and ecclesiastical officials in *John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes* 131-40.
Chapter Four

“Closed and kept most surely in religion”:
Richard Whitford’s Regulation of Lay Piety through Religious Culture

As reformers sought to undermine the spiritual authority of cloistered life,¹ demand among laypeople for a more comprehensive adaptation of religious devotions for private use had not diminished by the 1530s. Catering to the spiritual needs of such individuals, the Bridgettine community at Syon Abbey had for decades been exporting this culture to lay audiences through its diverse literary output.² Exceptional among the abbey’s small group of brothers was Richard Whitford. Although Whitford was not alone in his efforts to renew religious life or adapt it for a devout laity, his writing is distinguished by an innovative synthesis of traditional elements of monastic discipline and devotional culture that offers comprehensive models of lay piety as an alternative to the popular appeal of Reformed Christianity.

In this chapter, I will examine two of Whitford’s most important works: the Pype or Tonne of the Life of Perfection, directed primarily at a religious audience for the purpose of defending and revitalizing life in the cloister, and A Werke for Housholders, aimed at aristocrats and gentry wishing to organize their households on rigidly devout lines. Both the Pype and the Werke contribute to an orthodox programme of reform by championing a return to thorough observance of a complex devotional regimen. For Whitford, the value of monastic culture lay in its capacity to furnish comprehensive

¹ In De votis monasticis, Luther draws on earlier attacks against the institution of monasticism, particularly those raised by Wyclif, which claimed that religious persons go against the ideals of Christian living by sequestering themselves away from the world and adhering to a rigid set of practices outlined in a rule that is dissociated from the Gospel. On Luther’s criticisms of the principles of monasticism, see Knowles, Religious Orders 3: 165-166.
² For a discussion of Syon’s sixteenth-century religious publications, see Rhodes, “Syon Abbey.”
models of lay piety that upheld the traditional political and spiritual order. Thus, while monasticism functions in both texts as a principle of reform aimed primarily at the individual, Whitford, both implicitly and explicitly, represents this principle as having a broader, national impact and therefore draws on the extensive pattern of monastic living not only to revitalize the faith but also to engage directly with Protestantism.

Taking Whitford’s conversion to religious life as my point of departure, I will offer a brief overview of Syon Abbey, its literary culture and its religious publications before proceeding to my discussion of the *Pype*. By focusing on the text’s unusual governing metaphor of religious life as a pipe or barrel, I will explore the significance Whitford attaches to monastic discipline, particularly to reading, for the spiritual wellbeing of individuals, as well as of society as a whole. From here, I will return to Whitford’s concern with the relationship between the cloister and the broader community in my examination of the *Pype*’s central discussion of obedience, in which the brother moves from considering religious obedience to contemplating that owed by sovereigns to papal authority. Based on this emphasis on obedience, I argue that Whitford offers a unique response to the rising popularity of William Tyndale’s doctrine of obedience by redefining the term along specifically monastic lines in order to create a model that balances royal against clerical authority. Turning finally to *A Werke for Housholders*, I will discuss the regimen of devout living prescribed in this text, which seeks to promote orthodox patterns of behaviour through aligning them with monastic discipline. In its expectations regarding behaviour, pastimes, habitual prayer and memorization, the *Werke* does not just draw upon claustral traditions in setting out a devotional programme, but re-imagines the secular household along monastic lines. Thus, through a careful examination
of the *Pype* and the *Werke*, this chapter aims to demonstrate the ways in which Whitford’s spiritual guides adapt monastic discipline in new ways in order to resist the growing appeal of Protestant doctrines.

**Whitford’s Retreat from Public Service and the Literary Culture at Syon Abbey**

Shortly before entering the religious community at Syon Abbey, Richard Whitford—then chaplain to Richard Fox, bishop of Winchester—enjoyed a position within the clerical hierarchy that brought him near to the heart of ecclesiastical as well as regal authority. As a former fellow of Queen’s College, Cambridge, graduate of the University of Paris, and close friend of Erasmus, Whitford’s presence in the household of such a prominent statesman and patron as Fox is hardly surprising. From an account passed down from William Roper’s *Life of More*, and subsequently embellished by Nicholas Harpsfield, Whitford showed himself to be fully cognizant of political realities at the Tudor court. The episode, which centres on a young More when he was still only a burgess of the Parliament, conveys Whitford’s perceptiveness quite well. More had fallen out of favour with Henry VII on account of his opposition to the king’s plan to raise money to pay for Lady Margaret’s marriage to James IV of Scotland, and he sought advice from Fox, who belonged to the king’s Privy Council. Roper tells us that, when the two met, Fox attempted to entrap More:

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3 The little information we have about Whitford’s life prior to entering Syon Abbey in c. 1511 is from Roper’s *Life of More* and pertains to a chance encounter More had with him in c. 1504 (Roper 8).

4 Harpsfield records that while Henry VII could not by law retaliate against More directly, since such an act would “infringe and breake the ancient libertie of the Parliament house for free speaking touching the publique affaires,” the king divised a “causelesse quarell” against More’s father and had him placed in the Tower until a £100 fine could be paid (see Harpsfield 15-16).
...pretendinge greate favour towards [More], [Fox] promised him that, if he wold be ruled by him, he wold not faile into the kings favour againe to restore him; meaning (as it was after coniectured) to cause him thereby to confesse his offence against the kinge, whereby his highnes might with the better coler haue occasion to revenge his displeasure against him. But when he came from the Bysshoppe, he fell in communicacion with one master Whitford, his familiar friend, then Chapleine to that bishopp, and after a Father of Syon, and shewed him what the bishop had saide vnto him, desiringe to haue his advise therein; who for the passion of god, pryed him in no wise to followe his Councel: “For my lord, my master,” quoth he, “to serve the kings torne, will not sticke to agree to his owne fathers death.” So Sir Thomas Moore retorned to the Bishoppe no more. (Roper 8)

While this encounter suggests a great deal of mistrust towards clerical as well as regal power on the part of Whitford—perhaps even foreshadowing his retreat from the court to the monastery—it also attests the great esteem which More held for Whitford. At this point in 1504 Whitford was an intimate friend of both More and Erasmus, and in this episode it is More who is actively soliciting advice from his “familiar friend.” Counselling More to avoid submitting himself to Fox, Whitford himself increasingly withdrew from the affairs of state until finally entering Syon Abbey. Thus, while More emerged from a possible religious vocation to become one of the most renowned humanists of his day, Whitford emerged from a humanist background to enter the cloister and dedicate himself to the preservation of and transmission of monastic ideals.

Joining the ranks of the Syon brethren not long after this episode is believed to have taken place, Whitford remained deeply invested in religious life outside the monastery and spent much of his energies upholding the ideals of the cloister as they came under increasing criticism. Employing his pen to accomplish the task, it is during the period between his entrance into the abbey c. 1511 and its dissolution in 1539 that the brother flourished as an author and translator. Whitford composed *The Pype or Tonne of the Lyfe of Perfection* (1532), a guide to religious living which defended the institution of
monasticism against Lutheran attacks. Despite the ambitious scope of this work, “the wretch of Syon” – as he called himself – is best known for translating a range of texts central to monastic life at Syon, such as St. Augustine’s Rule (accompanied by Hugh of St Victor’s commentary); the *Golden Epistle*; the Syon version of the Sarum martyrology; short works attributed to Bernard, Bonaventure, Chrysostom, and Isidore; and, perhaps most famously, the *Folowyng of Chryste*—the most popular sixteenth-century translation of Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi*.5 Aimed primarily at the community of Bridgettine nuns at Syon, these works enjoyed considerable popularity among other religious houses as well as among the laity.6 Equally important to his literary output are the works he wrote directly for laypeople, such as *The Dayly Exercyse and Experyence of Dethe*, which addresses their spiritual needs by offering practical instruction on meditation, and perhaps more significantly on account of its wide circulation, *A Werke for Housholders* (1530).7

Although Whitford’s transition from a scholar with strong humanist inclinations to monk is far from atypical, no information survives that could shed light on his decision

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5 The attribution of this translation of the *Imitatio* to Whitford has been challenged in recent years. While Edward J. Klein, who edited *The Imitation of Christ From the First Edition of an English Translation Made c. 1530 by Richard Whitford*, argues convincingly for a Whitford attribution, critics such as Rogar Lovatt and Glanmore Williams have more recently challenged this claim. Among the arguments Williams cites are Whitford’s uncharacteristic failure to append his name to the translation, as well as arguments derived from internal, stylistic evidence (Williams 30). One piece of evidence that supports a case for Whitford is the author’s statement, at the end of *The Pype*, that he is now translating a work by “mayster Johan Gerson,” who was believed to have been the author of the *Imitatio* during the Middle Ages (*Pype* 452).

6 Martha W. Driver argues for a very broad circulation of Whitford’s texts, labelling them “bestsellers in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries”; she goes on to note that “Whytford’s works were republished by a number of contemporary printers, among them Robert Redman, Robert Wyer, Thomas Gadfray, Robert Copeland, and Wynkyn de Worde. Several of Whytford’s handbooks, most notably *The Golden Pystle* and *A Werke for Housholders*, went into simultaneous editions, printings issued the same year, often by two or more printers. This implies that there was a great clamour for Whytford’s works, which probably went beyond the religious market” (233).

7 With seven extent editions of *A Werke for Householders* (1530?, 1530, 1531?, 1531, 1533, and twice in 1537) this work remained one of the most popular religious texts of the 1530s (see Rhodes, “Syon Abbey” 22-23).
to enter the cloister. Little is known about his early life or education until he appears in
the university records at Cambridge in 1496.\footnote{Whitford is recorded as a questionist at Cambridge in 1496-7. No one is certain about his exact place of birth but it is generally believed that he was raised in Whitford, a village near Holywell in Flintshire, Wales.} A fellow of Queen’s College from 1498 to 1504, Whitford was given a leave of absence in 1498 to escort William Blount, fourth
Lord Mountjoy, to Paris.\footnote{While away, Mountjoy was able to establish connections help to secure his reputation as a literary patron. Indeed, it was during this trip that Mountjoy first made the acquaintance of Erasmus, who served as his tutor while he was residing in Paris. In his entry for Mountjoy in the \textit{Dictionary of National Biography}, James Carley notes that Blount and Erasmus became such good friends that when Blount invited him to return to England, Erasmus responded that he was “willing to follow Mountjoy even to the lower world itself.”} Admitted to the BA and MA in 1498 and 1499, respectively, by the University of Paris, Whitford first became acquainted with Erasmus while he was a reader at the university. This literary friendship would remain close throughout the first
decade of the century, and it is during this time that Erasmus, dedicating his declamation to Whitford, asked him to compare its merits with More’s own response to Lucian’s \textit{Pro tyrannicidio}.\footnote{See \textit{The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 142 to 297 1501-1514} 2: 191.} After returning to England, Whitford rose quickly within the ranks of his
college at Cambridge: between 1500 and 1502 he became dean of the chapel, then junior
bursar, and finally senior bursar of Queen’s. In the time between his residence at the
university and his entrance into Syon Abbey, Whitford likely served as chaplain to
Richard Fox, bishop of Winchester.\footnote{The only evidence, however, of Whitford’s position in Fox’s household comes from Roper’s, and later Harpsfield’s, accounts of More’s run-in with the bishop which was quoted earlier. Whitford’s name does not appear in the records of the bishopric of Winchester or in Fox’s correspondences.} However, the scarcity of information on this period in his life makes it impossible even to speculate on Whitford’s motives for leaving his chaplaincy.

Having established his humanist credentials as well as his political savvy in
ecclesiastical and civic affairs in the household of Bishop Fox, Whitford turned away
from the high-profile literary and clerical circles to which he belonged in order to become
one of the brothers at the monastery of Saint Saviour and Saint Bridget of Syon. Information is equally scarce concerning Whitford’s entrance into Syon and his subsequent life there. Scholars date the year of his profession near 1511 on account of a will he had drawn up in the same year. The next recorded account of Whitford dates from the period of Thomas Bedyll and Roland Lee’s visitations to the abbey in 1534 to secure the brothers’ submission to the Acts of Succession and Supremacy. Although there is no reason to believe that the community escaped swearing to the oath,\(^\text{12}\) Bedyll’s letters indicate on various occasions Whitford’s resistance to royal supremacy. For example, on 21 July 1534 Bedyll writes,

> I handled Whitford ... in the garden bothe with faire wordes and with foule, and shewed him that throughe his obstinacy he shuld be brought to the greate shame of the world for his irreligious life, and for using bawdy wordes to diverse ladys at the tymes of their confession, whereby (I sayed) he myght be the occasion that shrift shalbe layed downe throughe England: but he hath a braysyn forhead, whiche shameth at nothing.\(^\text{13}\)

While we may be inclined to question the motives behind Bedyll’s accusations of shamelessness or misconduct against Whitford, these lines offer ample evidence of the brother’s commitment to maintaining the sacraments of the old religion. Whitford’s obstinacy to the king continued even after Richard Reynolds, the spiritual father of the community known as the “Angel of Syon,” was executed at Tyburn.\(^\text{14}\) Two months after Reynolds’s death, Bedyll returned to the abbey to gauge the community’s attitudes.

Although Syon’s brethren along with the abbess and nuns were “found... as comfortable in every thing as myght be devysed,” two of the brothers remained intractable and would

\(^\text{12}\) About this visitation, David Knowles notes that while “[t]here is no certificate of any oaths received, ...it is equally difficult to suppose that Syon was allowed to remain unsworn” (Religious Orders in England 3: 216).

\(^\text{13}\) Thomas Wright, 49.

\(^\text{14}\) On Reynolds’s role at Syon, see Adam Hamilton, The Angel of Syon: The Life and Martyrdom of Blessed Richard Reynolds, Martyred at Tyburn, May 4, 1535 and F. R. Johnston, Blessed Richard Reynolds, the Angel of Syon.
need, as Bedyll reports, to be “weeded out.” Knowles speculates that these recalcitrant members of the community were most likely Richard Lache and Richard Whitford. 

Writing almost a month later, Bedyll reports,

...on Sonday last, one Whitford, one of the most wilful of that house, preched and wolde speke no worde of the Kings Grace said title; and this man hath but small lernyng, but is a greate rayler... if any such remedie shalbe put in execution, as touching the attachment, or putting in prison, of any of thaim, it shuld best be bestowed, in myne opinion, upon Frire Whitford and upon Lache, which bee the vaunperlers, and heddes of thair faction. 

In the end, Lache, along with other pockets of resistance within the community, conceded to the pressure applied by the Cromwell’s agents. Whitford, however, remained constant to his ideals and, as the portraits we have suggest, continued on as an obstinate opponent to Henry’s reform of the English Church. The last piece of concrete information we have concerning Whitford is that he remained at Syon until its suppression in 1539 and received a pension of £8 per annum along with the other members of the community. No evidence exists that can tell us exactly where Whitford spent the last years of his life, although it is generally held that he served as chaplain within the Mountjoy household until his death in 1543.

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15 Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII, 1125 (Bedyll to Cromwell, 28 July).
16 Knowles also points out that when he was placed under pressure, Whitford was allowed to leave the abbey at liberty. Lache may have spent time in the Tower. See The Religious Orders in England 3: 218.
18 Richard Lache was eventually persuaded to side with the king, and soon after his conversion wrote to the brothers at the London Charterhouse urging them to submit to the Acts. William Copynger, who became confessor-general, met personally with Cromwell and was likewise persuaded to join the king’s camp. For a fuller account of the capitulation of these Syon Brethren, see Knowles, The Religious Orders in England 3: 218-20.
19 Once again, this date cannot be verified. However, as J. T. Rhodes notes in his entry for Whitford in the DNB, the Syon martyrology states that he died on 16 September most likely in the year 1543, since his pension was no longer paid after 3 October 1543.
Despite the small amount of information we possess, it is clear that Whitford’s decision to enter Syon stands paramount among the events of his life—especially since his entire corpus centres in some way on the restoration or adaptation of the monastic life. The rigorous intellectual climate at Syon, as well as its strong commitment to strict religious observance, leave little doubt as to why this humanist and academic turned cleric chose to enter that particular community. Whitford’s determination to uphold the doctrines and disciplinary structure of the old religion, evident in all the records dating from the period that describe his resistance to the Acts of Succession and Supremacy, is even more clearly expressed in the *Pype* and in the *Werke*. In these two texts especially, his resolve to reinforce an adherence to the tenets of the faith among both religious and laypeople by promoting a greater devotional zeal is plainly manifested.

Yet Whitford’s application of monastic customs to regulate lay piety was a strategy that was shared by many of his brothers at the Bridgettine abbey. Founded by Henry V in 1415, Syon’s location across the Thames from the Charterhouse at Sheen as well as the royal palace of Richmond made it immediately favourable to a distinguished group of individuals who would comprise its eighty-five-member community.\(^\text{20}\) Many of the nuns left aristocratic households for the cloister, and many of the brothers, like Whitford, were either graduates of the universities or were chaplains for nobles or high-

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\(^\text{20}\) According to tradition, St Bridget received divine instructions to found an enclosed double order of men and women but intended primarily for female contemplatives. The composition of each house is neatly summarized by Anne Hudson: “[Each house’s] full complement was to have been sixty nuns, thirteen priests, four deacons, and eight lay brothers, making a total of eighty-five, symbolic of the post-Ascension community. The role of the priests (who symbolized the twelve apostles plus St. Paul) was to take the services, preach sermons (on Sundays they were to preach to the public in the vernacular), and assist the nuns with their devotions. The deacons, who could also be priests, represented the four principal doctors of the Church—Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory and Jerome—and their role too was to assist the nuns in their learning and devotional life” (Hudson “What the Nuns Read” 207). For further discussions of the foundation of Syon, see Aungier and Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* 3: 212-21.
ranking ecclesiastics. In addition to benefiting from the rigour of its observance\textsuperscript{21} and the elite members of its community, Syon’s prestige also increased on account of the donations from numerous high-profile aristocratic and ecclesiastical patrons.\textsuperscript{22} Part of the reason why Syon enjoyed such a beneficial relationship with so many well-connected admirers and sponsors was that, as Vincent Gillespie notes, “unlike many contemplative orders, the Syon brethren were expected to have a decisive and effective pastoral programme and to offer spiritual guidance and leadership” (“The Book And the Brotherhood” 187). The success of the Syon brothers as shepherds for diverse groups of laypeople and clerics was aided in particular by the abbey’s literary endeavours. In the course of evaluating the texts associated with the abbey, J. T. Rhodes notes that Syon’s influence derived not simply from its position as one of the most frequently visited abbeys in England in the early sixteenth century, but also from being a centre for the publication of religious literature (“Syon Abbey” 12).

Book culture at Syon as well as the evolving literary trends at the abbey (traceable in part through Thomas Betson’s catalogue of the brothers’ library) suggest that Whitford’s writing may have been part of a larger cultural programme. Scholars investigating the reading culture at Syon note that while the \textit{Regula Salvatoris}, the Rule of Bridget’s congregation confirmed by Urban V in 1370, restricts the number of service books to “as many as be necessary to doo dyvyne office and moo in no wyse,” provisions

\textsuperscript{21} Syon Abbey was also highly esteemed since, unlike many other female monasteries, it practiced strict enclosure for the sisters.

\textsuperscript{22} Among the most noteworthy aristocratic donors are Queen Catherine of Valois (widow of Henry V), John, duke of Bedford, as well as the Hungerford and Boleyn families. Cardinal Beaufort, Richard Clifford bishop of London, and Henry Chichele archbishop of Canterbury stand foremost among Syon’s clerical patrons. For a brief but comprehensive discussion of Syon’s donors, see Vincent Gillespie, “The Book and the Brotherhood.”
are made for a limitless supply of books for study. Moreover, the vernacular *Additions* to the Rule also include warnings against mistreatment of books and demands silence in the abbey library. Such prohibitions point to a strong reading culture that existed among the male and female inmates at Syon at the time of the publication of the *Additions* in the first half of the fifteenth century. In tracing the development of the brothers’ library at Syon, Vincent Gillespie notes that at the end of the fifteenth century and at the beginning of the sixteenth century the Abbey’s collection of books increased dramatically (“The Book And the Brotherhood” 195). In addition to the increase in its holdings, the character of the library, when Whitford entered Syon, had also begun to change quite dramatically, as the brothers sought to remain in the vanguard of literary developments. Much of this change is owing, as Gillespie notes, to the acquisition of humanist editions and commentaries and their replacement of earlier medieval authorities: the replacement of the library’s grammar manuals as well as biblical commentaries to accommodate the New Learning—the methodological tools of grammatical-historical exegesis—is especially indicative. Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova*, a standard

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23 *The Rewyll of Seynt Sauioure*, 2. 49-50.
24 *The Rewyll of Seynt Sauioure and Other Middle English Brigittine Legislative Texts*, 4: 72. A useful discussion of the books may be found in Erler.
25 Although we know that the sisters at Syon had their own library as well as their own librarian, no inventory of the library’s contents survives. For a discussion of the nuns’ reading habits based on surviving evidence, see Hudson, “What the Nuns Read.”
26 Gillespie notes that contrary to general assumptions about the library dating to Syon’s founding, it “seems to have come into prominence only slowly,” and it is only after *Martiloge* begins recording benefactions in 1471 that the growth of the library begins to accelerate (“The Book And the Brotherhood” 195).
27 There are other factors which contribute to the removal of certain texts from the catalogue, which Gillespie acknowledges. These include “the deliberate withdrawal of stock; the recognition of irredeemable loss through loan or damage; ... [as well as] texts being superseded, perhaps by printed editions or more comprehensive holdings” (“The Book And the Brotherhood” 199).
28 On the rise of this new approach the text, see Amos.
29 The following description of trends in the acquisition and replacement of texts at Syon is entirely indebted to Vincent Gillespie’s discussions in his two articles “The Book and the Brethren: Reflections on the Lost Library of Syon Abbey” and “Syon and the New Learning.”
handbook composed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, was replaced by the Paris 1511-12 edition of Lucan donated by Richard Reynolds. Reynolds’s other bequest of Iodocus Balduis Ascensius’s Silvae, along with Whitford’s gift of the Paris 1496 edition of the Metamorphoses that included the commentary by Richard Regius, replaced classic reading texts by Cato, Avianus, Pamphilus, Horace, Maximian, Statius, and Claudian. As well, the catalogue’s older biblical commentaries were updated by the inclusion of writings by the Carthusian Ludolph of Saxony as well as Erasmus’s nine-volume 1516 edition of Jerome’s Opera.30 Especially noteworthy is the eagerness of the graduate members of the community, seeking to position themselves at the forefront of contemporary movements within literary culture, to embrace the diffusion of humanist reading from the continent. Whitford was clearly a part of this group of scholar monks, which included other Cambridge alumni such as Richard Reynolds, Stephen Sawndre, and John Steyke; like other members of the Syon community, Whitford was equally receptive to current developments within lay piety.

A crucial element of Syon’s book culture that is relevant to Whitford’s own literary project is the community’s atypical attitudes toward publication. In his discussion of Syon’s religious publications in the sixteenth century, J. T. Rhodes highlights two features in particular: the predominance of vernacular texts as well as the comprehensiveness of their scope. In addition to translations of St. Augustine’s Rule, the Bridgettine Office and Mass readings, the brothers were responsible for bringing numerous works on the religious life into the vernacular, most notably in The Myrroure

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30 For more information on the additions and the replacements of books in the Syon Library, see Vincent Gillespie’s exhaustive list in “The Book and the Brotherhood” 199-202.
of Oure Ladye, The Orchard of Syon and the Myrrour or Glasse of Cristes Passion.  

As well as translating such devotional texts, the Syon brothers published material that was exceedingly diverse: not only were they concerned with “elementary works of basic catechesis, instructions about virtuous living, the religious life, and prayer,” but the brothers also published “treatises on specific topics such as death, ...comprehensive works on the religious life... together with the recorded revelations of contemplatives” (Rhodes, “Syon Abbey” 17). While the extent to which the community actively organized a comprehensive catalogue of works designed to provide basic pastoral instruction as well as to export the devotional culture of the monastery can never be known for certain,32 we do know that the influence of Syon’s intellectual culture throughout England was massive, and that Whitford played an important role in this phenomenon.33

Speculations regarding a coordinated programme of publication may also be applied to Whitford himself. Although shorter works such as A Werke for Housholders and the Daily Excercyse were printed individually in multiple editions, they were also brought together in larger collections: indeed, Whitford, notes Rhodes, ensured that these texts would be printed in an identical format in order to be bound together at the least possible expense (“Syon Abbey” 24).34 Whitford’s savvy for creating channels to

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31 The many translations the brothers undertook, Rhodes notes, include “substantial works on the religious life and prayer by two Franciscan authors, David of Augsburg and Henry of Herph,” as well as numerous works attributed to St. Bonaventure. Also, incorporated into various translations were the works of Bernard, Chrysostom, Isidore, Ludolph of Saxony and Jordanus of Quedlinburg. Catherine of Siena’s Dialogo was, of course, translated as The Orchard of Syon. See further, Rhodes, “Syon Abbey” 16-17.

32 By out-producing every other house or order in England, the sheer number and range of Syon’s printed texts led Rhodes to speculate whether there may have been a “coordinated programme of publication” (“Syon Abbey” 17).

33 This influence was also increased by the important connection the abbey enjoyed with Wynkyn de Worde’s press. See especially George Keiser, “The Mystics and Early English Printers” 9-26.

34 Whitford’s sensitivity to the exigencies of printing is clearly apparent in his Dayly Excercyse and Expereynce of Dethe when he writes, “I wyll sende you vnto the lytle werke that I deuysed vnto youre communyon, or howselynge [A Dialgue... for a due preparacion vnto howselynge]. For to wryte and set
transmit monastic culture is certainly remarkable. By bringing books into the vernacular and by printing them in order to ensure the widest circulation, Whitford challenged Reformers not only by engaging with them directly on doctrinal issues but by attempting to reach larger audiences. Yet, what sets Whitford apart from his fellow brothers at Syon are the characteristic concerns, such as the relationship between regal and ecclesiastical authority as well as the household management, to which he would adapt monastic discipline in order to articulate a secular piety within traditional, orthodox parameters.

**The Pype or Tonne: Whitford’s Novel Applications of Monastic Discipline**

Described as “the most important of all of Whitford’s writings,” the *Pype or Tonne of the Life of Perfection* is not only the fullest exploration of the value of religious life.
made by the author but it is also his most explicit attempt at political intervention.\textsuperscript{38}

Whitford’s central metaphor of religious life as a barrel, an unusually down-to-earth vehicle, expresses his commitment to the value of monastic discipline as well as his anxieties about its ongoing neglect. In the \textit{Pype}, more stringent observance of traditional customs, such as the practice of \textit{lectio divina}, is singled out as a means not only for halting the decay of religious life but also for fashioning idealized communities in the New World. Moreover, Whitford applies monastic obedience onto a broader secular context in order to create an alternative paradigm for balancing clerical and regal authority that responds directly to Tyndale’s \textit{Obedience of a Christian Man} and its potential for influencing royal policy.

Written originally for the sisters of Syon abbey, the \textit{Pype} champions the value of their vocation to the individual and society by arguing for its necessity to living out the ideal Christian life. This claim is made explicit when, at the end of his treatise, Whitford argues that monasticism provides a pattern of living “moste apte and moste conueniant” (445) for the “lyfe euangelyke that... Christe caunsayled and also that he commaunded” served two ends as both a manual for monastic reform (in its capacity as a handbook for the community at Syon) and a defence of religion (as a response to Luther). Much of this hybridization is accomplished in the first segment of the \textit{Pype}. As Whitford writes in his preface, by furnishing people with responses to Luther’s attacks on monasticism (5-6), he assists his reader to understand better his or her own vocation. However, although the printed edition was intended to serve two ends, the \textit{Pype} remains, as James Hogg notes, “more a practical handbook on the religious life than a confutation of Luther” (102), especially since such material comprises only about one third of the text. Nevertheless, Whitford’s defence of monasticism against Lutheran attacks is significant because it allows the monk to set out in specific terms the importance of monasticism within religious culture and late-medieval English society as a whole.

\textsuperscript{38} P. G. Caraman’s 1947 article remains the only study to laud the monk as one of the most progressive monastic reformers of the latter Middle Ages, and discuss efforts to amend religious life and to engineer (at least in part) a “monastic renaissance” (15). Caraman singles out three of the brother’s works which pertain directly to religious life: \textit{Saint Augustine’s Rule in English Alone}, the \textit{Commentary on Saint Augustine’s Rule}, and the \textit{Pype} (3). And of this “trilogy,” the latter stands as “the most important” since it constitutes the author’s fullest and most original exploration of religious life (4). In his capacity as a reformer, Whitford distinguishes himself in his pedagogical approach to monastic renewal. Fundamental to Whitford’s plan for reform is his advocacy of higher standards of education within the cloister.
Yet, despite having written the text for the female members of the Bridgettine community, gender issues rarely arise in his discussion of monasticism. When he does acknowledge differences between male and female religious, he addresses disparities in education. Counselling once again reading and study as a deterrent against disciplinary laxity, Whitford applies the same advice to both communities. At the points in which he refers to the nuns specifically, it is to include them rather than exclude them from a particular exercise, asserting that he is of “the same mynde of al religious women / as theyr lernyng doth extende” (393). By not insisting on gender divisions, Whitford refers back to an older tradition of monasticism that sees the religious profession as equal. Such a tendency is not, however, unique to the brother since the double house at Syon seems itself to gesture back to this tradition as well. Indeed, in her discussion of the women’s reading and devotional study among the Bridgettines, Rebecca Krug notes that the sisters’ imitation of their founder through the performance of the liturgy and the reading of her words as well as others, the nuns could fashion their lives more closely along the model of Bridget in a manner that was “not necessarily gendered” (162). Yet for Whitford, to achieve this aim of living out the optimal Christian life, a religious vocation had to embrace fully the ideals of monastic discipline and this fact is at once made evident by the title of the treatise.

Whitford’s preface offers its readers a remarkably detailed portrait of monastic discipline that emphasizes its role in shaping the individual’s behaviour. This notion of enclosure entailed by his vocation is underlined as Whitford carefully elucidates how

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39 While the ideal of Bridgettine life may not have been influenced by preconceived ideas regarding female piety, the implementation of this life, as Krug goes on to note, entailed a great deal of struggle and the eventual dismissal of the Syon’s first abbess, Matilda Newton, who refused to accept legislation written by clerical authorities, in this case Peter Olafson, that would intrude on Bridget’s own Rule (see 163-66).
each of the different pieces of the pipe or barrel stand in for the various elements of religious life:

> lyfe... is moche lyke vnto a pleasaunt / precious / and holsome wyne / contayned / preserued / and kept in a pyppe or tonne. Whiche vessell ben communely made of planed bordes. And those bordes compassed about / and bounde fast with hopes. And yet those hopes: bounde and made fast with small wykers. So that if the wykers (by any chaunce) be lost or broken: the hopes forthwith / done flye or starte of. The bordes than done lose and ben divided or departed in sondre. And so dothe the wyne flowe out and perisshe. In lyke manner is it of the lyfe of perfection: whiche is closed and kept most surely in religion. And religyon is made and standeth principally / in the iii essenciall vowes / obedience / wilfull pouertie / and chastitie. For these thre (as in maner the bordes of the sayd vessell) ben the substanciall partes of religyon. Which vowes... ben compassed and bounde to gether (as the sayd vessell with the hopes) with the preceptes and counsell of the holy rules: ... and yet those rules ben knyte and made fast to gether (as the sayd hopes with the wykers) with the holy sermonies of religion: whiche ben contayned in the statutes / and constitucions / addicicions / iniunctions. (3-4)

Immediately striking about this passage is Whitford’s unusual choice of metaphors for depicting religious life. From the twelfth century onwards, Ellen Caldwell notes, architectural imagery was used more frequently to articulate the shifting attitudes towards cloistered life as emphasis moved away from bodily self-denial towards a more constructive “affirmation of one’s spiritual powers” (15). As a result, metaphors for monastic life took on spatial dimensions as the monk’s or nun’s interior life was represented as a castle, a garden, and even the water which fish inhabit: all of these images, Caldwell argues, emphasize a desire to focus on the positive elements of cultivating one’s “interior, psychological space” (19). In contrast to these more familiar and more majestic spatial metaphors that draw attention to the expansive interior world which religious life makes available, Whitford employs an image that is arguably more democratic: whereas aristocratic castles and enclosed gardens are elite spaces that few people would have had access to, wine was a staple drink for everyone. Thus, while the
quotidian image of the pipe or barrel emphasizes the necessity of monastic discipline for containing the individual’s thoughts and behaviour within acceptable and orthodox limits, the wine suggests that perfection is available to everyone.\textsuperscript{40} Possibly on account of his desire to reach out to an audience that included a wider segment of the middle class who “purpose or intende to entire religion” (5), Whitford’s barrel-and-wine metaphor benefits from being familiar and immediately understandable.

Equally striking is the way that Whitford’s metaphor seems to encourage a reversal of value judgements. A pipe or barrel is valuable for what it contains. Often this is some form of nourishment or even precious documents, as in the case of the Pipe Rolls which held the records of the Exchequer. In his treatise, however, Whitford gives the container a weight equal to if not greater than its contents, the “precious / and holsome wyne” that stands in for this “lyfe or maner of lyuing” (3). To contain this valuable, yet immaterial substance, Whitford takes great pains to describe a highly realized object. Thus, while the text acknowledges the priority of the barrel’s contents, the barrel itself is just as important since it is the container that gives its valuable contents integrity: without the container, the contents cannot exist in a form that’s of any use. Moreover, unlike the more common spatial metaphors that authors use to emphasize the brother’s or sister’s freedom within an open interior life, Whitford’s barrel image draws attention to how the rigours of monastic custom and discipline control and contain the life of those in religion. Any ambiguity about the restrictive nature of this culture is cleared away as Whitford further draws out the implications of his choice of metaphor:

\textsuperscript{40} Although not singled out in the Bridgettine Rule, the \textit{Additions} indicate that wine was served with the mixtum, or light meal, as the principal source of nourishment to keep the sisters in good health. See the fifty-first chapter “Of takyng of myxtom and sayng graces” (Rewell 4: 157-64).
For as in the sayd pype: whanne small wykers ben broken or losted: all the residue doth folowe fayle and decaye / vnsto the distruction of the wyne. So in lyke maner / whan the holy cerimonies of religion ben neglected... [t]han done the rules decaye: and the vowes losted. (4-5)

Drawing on the familiarity of his image, Whitford not only comments on the role of ceremony in upholding the rule but also stresses the interdependence of ceremonies, vows and rules to a healthy vocation. All are necessary, according to the brother, and if one is lacking religious life is quickly corrupted. Thus for Whitford, it is the outward forms, the discipline and the customs of claustrial life, that define monastic identity and not one’s interior state of being: the function of these forms is to reinforce the central tenets of the rule. Whitford’s discussion of religious ceremony clearly illustrates this fact.

Responding to Lutheran claims that monastic rules lead one away from the Christ, the *Pype* asserts that careful observation of religious ceremonies as well as obedience to rules and ordinances of the order to which one belongs helps the individual “more perfectely and more very christianly kepe the lawes of the gospell and the commaundements and counsayles of Christ” (29). Ceremony, which Whitford defines as a rite, a custom, or a practice (see 85) and which includes the monastic habit, periods of silence and the division of the day between various activities, is essential to the individual’s moral formation. By devoutly observing such ceremonies, Whitford declares, the monk or nun consciously constructs a pattern of living that makes him or her more receptive to the “grace” which will aid him or her to follow more closely the “lawe of the gospel” (121). Whitford makes this explicit when he claims that “certeynly the beste and moste perfecte educacion or bryngynge up of youthe unto vertue and good maners is in
The importance of these customs as tools for determining one’s exterior behaviour as well as interior devotions is underscored when Whitford, citing Hugh of St Victor, admonishes religious to observe the discipline of their order even in private. Such practices help to ensure that one honours God continually “in soule / herte / or mynde” (86) despite the fact that such interior devotions, by the author’s own admission, “nedeth no ceremonies” (86). Frequent performance of regular, ritualized actions are thus viewed as crucial elements in the monk’s or nun’s formation since, as Whitford’s language indicates, such regulation of outward behaviour shapes one’s private habits of thought.

In addition to the importance of ceremony to religious life, Whitford places a significant amount of stress, at various points throughout the *Pype*, on the role of reading in reforming claustral life. Whitford affirms, as P. G. Caraman notes, that superiors should give the brothers and sisters under their care every opportunity for reading since books contain “the food and clothing of the soul.” More specifically, the reading he prescribe is explicitly indicated as the contemplative reading of the cloister rather than the philologico-critical reading he practiced in his youth while still closely associated with Erasmus’s circle of northern humanists. Whitford’s advocacy of monastic *lectio* stands behind much of the advice he offers for strengthening the individual’s vocation as well as preventing English monasticism’s further decline. This is especially apparent near the end of his discussion on monastic poverty. To conclude his segment, Whitford leaves off advising what not to do and instead offers his reader a positive strategy for uprooting

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41 That Whitford is referring to monasticism and not religion in its more general sense of adherence to one particular faith is made evident by the context of the passage, which concerns individuals who are pressured into entering the cloister by their family and friends.

42 Quoted in Caraman 6. Caraman foregrounds the importance of reading to Whitford’s commitment to education as a means to improving the quality of religious life. Curiously, however, Caraman traces Whitford’s dedication to literature’s ameliorative benefits for the professed individual to his association with More’s humanist circle; he neglects entirely the monastic literary tradition to which the brother belonged.
a desire for property. The strategy he counsels is strongly reminiscent of the traditional spiritual exercise of *lectio divina*:

I do sende you unto vitas Patrum . . . Be nat I praye you therefore lothe to tourne the boke. I have shewed you the place it is but very short and yet (as they say) very swete and profytable. Rede it ones ouer and if ye haue a loue and a desyre unto this holy vertue wyfull pouerte: and ful determinate mynde to auoyd, fle, abhore, and utterly to fle the contrarie vice paysoned propriete: ye shall (I dare say) rede it ouer agayne with good wyll undesired. Our lorde moue and styrre your mynde to folowe it or at the leest to inforce and to attempete: to attayne unto the toppe of the hyll the moste hyghe pynt of this perfection. (377-78)

As with most authors in the latter Middle Ages who invoke the process of meditative reading known as *lectio divina*, Whitford does not name it specifically. Yet, the process he describes, which moves from initial reading to a more reflective rereading “with good wyll” so as to raise one’s thoughts to the heights of perfection, is highly reminiscent of the sacred reading practiced within the cloister. Indeed, the spatial metaphor of an upward ascent in stages that Whitford employs recalls the more familiar language of sacred reading as an upward ascent on the rungs of a ladder. Nor is this the only instance in which Whitford promotes a return to traditional monastic reading practices as a catalyst for reforming monastic discipline and ensuring adherence to one’s profession. In combating idleness, for example, the erudite brother ought to devote a major part of the day to reading. He states that monks, “if they be learned,” should “gyue and applie themselfe unto the study of holy scripture or approved auctores” (392) in the hours before noon when the Office is not being said. If the brother is not involved in some form of manual labour during the afternoon, he should be “exercised... in wryting or rehersyng of some maters red or lerned byfore” (393).

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43 As Ivan Illich notes, the term *lectio divina* appears less frequently in abbey records and other manuscript sources after the thirteenth century (*In the Vineyard of the Text* 64).
44 The classic example of this metaphor is found in Guigo II’s *The Ladder of Perfection*. 

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That Whitford intends the frequent recourse to meditative reading to serve the additional role of limiting of one’s thoughts is evident in his encouragement of the “study of holy scripture” to habituate one to “drive away / and destoye” vain fantasies (415). Whitford’s concern over actively managing the thoughts of religious is evident in the Pype when he compares a person’s mind to “a rote / or a whele in a wynde: that neuer doth rest / but alway tourneth and doth renewe cogitacions and thoughtes” (417). While his choice of imagery neatly conveys the uncontrollability of cognitive activity, Whitford asserts that the “batayle / bytwene the persone / and his thoughtes” begins the moment he or she reflects on how the “mynd is occupied” (417). The martial register Whitford uses to frame the individual’s efforts to maintain a firm control over arbitrary thoughts is succeeded by an equally violent admonition to restrain them within extremely narrow parameters:

Blessed be that persone that doth holde and restrain his children / or babes / that is to say / his fyrste mocions: and that doth thruste and crushe theyr hed vnto the stone / that is vnto Christ.  (418)

Adapting the imagery from Psalm 137 and, most likely, his interpretation of the children as “fyrste mocions” from Augustine, Whitford transforms the psalmist’s petition for the destruction of his enemies’ children into a violent exhortation to keep careful guard over any thought that could threaten one’s spiritual wellbeing. Such language, I would argue, is not only indicative of the severity with which the brother wishes to inculcate a habit of auto-evaluation through meditative reading in his audience, but may also be suggestive of

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45 Paul borrows this image from the Psalm 137 when, in 1 Corinthians 10: 4, he states that “that Rock was Christ.” In the Enarrationes in Psalmos, Augustine, reading this episode as referring to the necessity of stamping out lustful thoughts so that evil does not take root in the individual, writes “when lust is born, before evil habit gives it strength against you, when lust is little, by no means let it gain the strength of evil habit; when it is little, dash it. But you fear, lest though dashed it die not; Dash it against the Rock; and that Rock is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4)” (Expositions 137).
an anxiety on his part over the uncertain control that can be maintained over one’s private thoughts. Indeed, the introspection which such practices promoted could result in a greater sense of spiritual entitlement on the part of the laity and even dissent from clerical authorities.\textsuperscript{46} 

However, before Whitford addresses the specific ways in which he plans to reform the cloister, such as through the efficacy of reading—that fundamental “habituall custome” (415) of monastic discipline—to carefully manage the various thoughts that arise during moments of private devotion, he offers his readers a vision, set in the New World, of the larger role religion plays within secular society. Although Whitford’s narrative concerns the discipline of friars and not monks, the brother is reticent about drawing sharp distinctions between the various communities, whether enclosed or not, that obey a rule. This blurring of boundaries between monk and friar is especially evident in Whitford’s response to hypothetical objections against religious life:

\begin{quote}
I can nat deney but that monasticall religion is sore dekeyde... Shewe vs (saye they) one monasterie where the promise of theyr profession is perfourmed. I can shewe diuerse of the reuerend fathers of the obseruauntes / the charterhouses / with other. (47)
\end{quote}

Here, Whitford’s comments shed a great deal of light on how exactly he imagines “monastic religion” as well as the ideas of enclosure and confinement that are so

\textsuperscript{46} Although the rising popularity of private devotion need not be viewed as a movement away from more outward and corporate forms of orthodox piety, the rise of Lollard sympathies among the gentry is suggestive. Andrew Brown discusses this phenomenon in \textit{Popular Piety in Late Medieval England} (see esp. 202-22). Concern over what one read in private on the part of ecclesiastical authorities is made clear in the printing history of the \textit{Image of Love}. Printed in 1525 by Wynkyn de Worde, this text circulated widely among the community of nuns at Syon. However, in the same year de Worde was ordered by the Bishop of London to retrieve every copy since the book was thought to “contain heresey” (See Krug 203; Reed 163). Moreover, shortly before Whitford would write this treatise, Thomas More expressed similar apprehensions over private reading and the concern over believers who, upon reading the wrong material in private, would take up heterodox doctrines. In his \textit{Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer}, More laments that anyone should have to read such tracts, both Catholic and Protestant, and insists that the devout would be better served by occupying themselves “in prayour, good medytacyon, and redynge of suche englysshe books as moste may norysshe and increase deuotion” (\textit{CW} 8: 37), such as pseudo-Bonaventure’s \textit{Blessed Life of Jesus Christ}, the \textit{Imitatio Christi} and Hilton’s \textit{Scale of Perfection} which he names explicitly in the following lines.
forcefully conveyed in his metaphor of religious life as a pipe or barrel. By slotting Franciscans next to Carthusians, Whitford’s definition seems less concerned with physical enclosure than with the regulation and discipline inherent in religious life, a term which is virtually synonymous with monasticism in the text. Despite Syon’s reputation for observing strict physical enclosure, Whitford emphasizes instead a more symbolic form of enclosure which, like its more literal counterpart, secures, as Christopher Cannon notes, “the body’s imaginative boundaries.” Such “disciplinary practice” as Whitford seems to have in mind, plays, argues Sarah Beckwith, an integral and highly successful role in producing “religious subjects.” Yet, while Beckwith’s discussion of religious discipline focuses attention solely on the subject who imposes this rigid discipline upon him- or herself, Whitford viewed such regulation not only as essential to the individual for living out the most ideal form of Christian life but also as generative since its performance extended outward beyond the individual to shape the beliefs of others.

Whitford’s most vivid example of the benefits to the wider community that results from a careful observation of religious discipline is expressed in a brief conversion

47 That Whitford’s definition is primarily focused on regulation and discipline is made evident when he turns, near the end of the treatise, to defining the term religious and states, There haue ben ever among all maner of nacions (as we sayd before) some maner of persones: that more precisely and more reuerently / and with more deuote cerimonies dyd honoure unto theyr god or goddes: than dyd the comune sorte of the people / and those were called religious persons. So ye as wel among the infidels as among the people of god were ever some persones after this maner of religion. (441)


49 Although discussing anchoritic life, Cannon’s comments are equally applicable to Whitford’s symbolic enclosure based on regulation. Especially apt is Cannon’s observation that this enclosed life is often described as a fortress, as it is in the Ancrene Wisse, in earlier medieval texts as a way for the individual to understand his or her life in relation to the world (see “Enclosure” 113).

50 Beckwith 809. Beckwith goes on to note that such regulation, as well as the more literal form of physical enclosure demanded by such texts as the Ancrene Wisse “establishes the psychic construction of a subject, its social formation, and it does so through the regulatory religious practices that orient the subject in space and time” (809).
narrative. In his account of the quasi utopian society that the Franciscan Observants are helping to construct in New Spain, Whitford comments that:

...in the newe founde lande that is called newe spayne / ben many and divers miracles done by religious persones. ...eueryche of [the friars] done take vnto theyr cure and laboure children to teache and specially the chyldren of the great states and rulers whiche children (whan they haue learned the feythe of Christe) done (with merueylous feruour) preache i maner and shewe vnto the people the same feythe as they lerned of theyr teachers / the sayd freres minores. (30)

Just as More located his ideal commonwealth in the New World, Whitford constructs his own vision of an idealized community—removed from the reach of most Europeans—in the Americas out of second-hand reports. In his brief account of the friars’ mission, Whitford, like Hythloday, depicts what would have appeared to European readers as a similarly topsy-turvy world where children preach, instruct and convert parents in the precepts of the faith as an idealized Christian commonwealth begins to take shape. The sanctity of this ideal society is underwritten by numerous miraculous occurrences. Owing to the holiness and devotion of the people, “inspired / inflamed / and kindled with the spirite of god” (30), the Christ Child appears in a white garment and instructs the people for “many days” (30) while the Virgin materializes before two recently converted women struggling to learn the Paternoster and teaches them not just this fundamental Christian prayer but “all maner of thynges that were necessary unto Christes feyth” (31). No doubt intended to provide a sharp contrast to the disordered society of Europe, the image of New Spain that Whitford paints, where the sacred and the divine converge with the everyday, serves as a powerful criticism of Europeans’ attack on the value of the religious orders. Whitford’s deliberate placement of this passage in the middle of his vindication of religious life adds significant weight to his rebuttal against Lutheran assaults since his
depiction of a utopian society stresses the integral role which the friars, faithful to the
discipline of their rule, play in constructing an ideal Christian commonwealth.

The role of monasticism in converting the inhabitants of Spain’s colonies was, by
Whitford’s reckoning, fundamental. In championing the vital role played by the
Observants in the New World, he emphatically states that it was on account of the faith
and discipline of the friars that such apparitions occurred in the first place: “These
miracles coulde nat haue ben done by those riligious fathers excepte they had kepte theyr
rules and pleased god” (31). The “decay” of the religious orders in Europe, frequently
noted by Whitford, eliminates the possibility for such miracles at home; yet, Whitford’s
tale from America, like More’s Utopia, points to the potential that a disciplined life can
have in transforming the community and its individual members. Writing almost fifteen
years after Utopia’s publication, there is no reason why Whitford would not have
already known that text firsthand.

Whitford’s discussion of obedience, which fills almost two hundred pages and far
exceeds the segments on either poverty or chastity, is central to the Pype’s attempt at
political intercession since it engages in a direct dialogue with Tyndale’s Obedience. In
addition to serving as a remedy to the decadence that had beset religious life after
centuries of increasing laxity, monastic obedience, according to Whitford, was crucially
important to the wellbeing of the commonwealth. We know that his intended audience
extended outward beyond the cloister since, from the outset, Whitford states that his topic

51 From the outset, and throughout the treatise, Whitford acknowledges the “decaye of religion in this
present tyme” (5), which admits the validity of certain criticism made by Lutherans, but he always locates
the source of this decay in the neglect of religious ceremonies by the monks themselves. For example,
Whitford writes that “surely the great cause / and occasion thereof : is the centempt / and negligence of the
wykers : the small ceremonies” (5).
52 Given that More began Utopia in 1515, four years after Whitford probably entered Syon, Whitford is
unlikely to have encountered Utopia through his personal association with More.
is not limited to monks alone but should “appertyne vnto all christianes generally” (127). Whitford’s concern that every Christian should remain obedient to the “ordinaunce of god and of his churche catholike” (126-7, my italics) is quite polemical given that by the time of the work’s publication on 23 March 1532, Henry had proclaimed himself supreme head of the Church in England the previous year and was in the process of forcing the submission of the clergy to the Crown. Instead of merely insinuating his dissent from Tudor policy, Whitford uses the Pype’s discussion of obedience to launch a sustained attack on the usurpation of papal authority by the king as well as the doctrinal arguments co-opted by the monarch from Tyndale’s Obedience of a Christian Man, widely considered, as Richard Rex notes, “the classic presentation of the Reformation theology of obedience in English” (Rex, “Crisis” 865).

Placing himself at the centre of the increasingly heated religious debate which was taking shape in England in the 1530s, Whitford offers an alternative model to Tyndale’s doctrine of obedience that invalidated papal and ecclesiastical authority by transferring the subject’s loyalty entirely to the sovereign. Recognizing the consequences Tyndale’s tract could have on Henrician political policy, Whitford considers not only the submission owed by the common Christian to the clergy but also the obedience owed by the “secular princes and souereynes” (140). Dangerous not only to the Roman Church, the Protestants, Whitford argues, also threaten to destabilize the established political order as well. Drawing attention to the fact that “[a]ll maner of christiane prynces... receiue the auctorite of theyr power of the spirituall parte of Christes churche / and done make solempne othe of theyr obedience thereunto” (144), the submission of the secular

53 Richard Rex provides a succinct overview of these statutes and the events which led to their creation in Henry VIII 1-28.
authorities to the spiritual is essential, the brother asserts, to the “wel ordred” community (144). Whitford then invokes familiar corporeal language to describe the commonwealth and underscores the propriety of this political arrangement by asserting that it is God’s will for “the body to be obedient vnto the soule and nat contrarie” (145). While the body is clearly representative of the secular order, the soul represents the Church or, more accurately, the clergy who hold authority within the Church. However, instability arises, he continues, as reformers “done flater the secular prynces and exalte theyr power: bycause they shulde defende them and theyr heresy” (141). As a result of the reformers’ “flattery,” the balance of power within the commonwealth is destabilized as the monarch becomes the sole locus of power. Whitford makes this point explicitly when he claims that their doctrines “make [monarchs] tyrannes” (142) and further incite them to perform acts of “moste cruell tyranny” (142). Whitford’s language, his use of corporeal metaphors as well as his labelling such sovereigns tyrants, upholds the status quo as normative and will lay the groundwork for his response to Tyndale’s “Englysshe boke of obedience” (144) – printed in 1528 only four years earlier than the *Pype* – which he identifies as the source of this politically disruptive ideology.

Whitford’s cognizance that Tudor policy towards the papacy could be determined or at least influenced by Tyndale’s doctrine of obedience demonstrates a keen awareness on his part of contemporary theological developments. While current scholarship continues to debate the origins and shaping forces of Henrician obedience doctrine,54

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54 For example, Stephan Haas argues that Tyndale’s writings played a significant role in shaping Tudor notions of royal supremacy, and that Henry obtained a copy of Tyndale’s *Obedience* from Anne Boleyn as early as 1528 or 1529. Responding directly to Haas’ argument, Richard Rex notes that the *Obedience* was among the list of forbidden works in 1530, and that Tyndale played “no causative role in determining Henry’ policy.” Instead, Rex argues that Henry and his ministers simply made use of Tyndale’s writings when they suited their purposes. See Rex, “The Crisis of Obedience” (872).
only recently has scholarly attention been focused on the role of this text in influencing Tudor policy. Stephen Haas’s “Henry VIII’s *Glasse of Truthe*” presents an important discussion of this connection which had only previously been speculated upon. Offering a glimpse into Henry’s thinking on papal authority almost two years before the Act of Supremacy, the king’s own *A Glasse of the Truthe*, according to Haas, lends support to earlier speculations by scholars such as J. J. Scarisbrick that Tyndale’s *Obedience* influenced Henry “to reconsider his concept of royal sovereignty” (353). Haas provides a succinct (and somewhat poetical) explanation for why this text was so attractive to the king:

> Henry sorely needed a polemical ship upon which he could sail into combat against the papal flotilla of arguments opposing his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Tyndale’s Lutheran description of a restored Christian monarchy whose king was “the vicar of God,” enforced God’s law on laymen and priest alike, and deserved total obedience from all Christian Englishmen, well suited Henry. (353-54)

The point which Haas so forcefully makes regarding Tyndale’s potential to supply monarchs with arguments for laying claim to papal authority is the very concern that Whitford is voicing in his 1532 edition of the *Pype*. What is, then, most striking about Whitford’s engagement with Tyndale’s tract is his insight into the possible ends to which it could be applied. Far from the popular perception of the late medieval monk, Whitford is not cut off from current theological developments and he does not advocate traditional forms of piety simply because he knows of no others. Whitford’s return to monastic

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55 For Scarisbrick’s discussion of Tyndale’s influence on the Tudor monarch, see his *Henry VIII* 247-50, 280, 289-90, and 296.
56 Haas bases his claim regarding Henry’s *Glasse* following Tyndale’s *Obedience* on the fact that the law of God, as presented in both texts, is completely promonarchical. In both texts, Haas demonstrates, “God’s law demand[s] that a loyal subject accept royal policy without question” (Haas 358). Attitudes evinced in the *Glasse* diverge completely from Henry’s *Determination of the Universities*, a vernacular rendering of academic, patristic, and scriptural proofs on the divorce compiled by the king shortly between 1530 and 1531 (see Haas 355-56).
obedience as an answer to the threat he perceived in royal supremacy constitutes an innovative response to contemporary political issues that applies religious discipline beyond the scope of piety.

Responding to the current debate over obedience and the potential for the Tudor regime to exploit Tyndale’s doctrine, Whitford redefines this virtue within the framework of monastic discipline. Describing obedience as “the mother and maystres and nurse of all other vertues” (137), Whitford’s discussion of obedience places the term back within a medieval tradition as an ideal of religious living. It is on account of this that the two definitions he offers—one aimed at “al christia nes” and the other at “religious persones” (126)—mirror each other so closely. The principal definition he gives reads,

Obedience generall: is an applicacion or graunt of hearte / minde / and wyll / vnto the due and lawfull precepts / or commandementes of the right and ordinarie superiours / accordynge vnto the ordinaunce of god and of his churche catholike. (126-7)

Immediately apparent in this definition is Whitford’s foregrounding of ecclesiastical power. Obedience must be rendered to secular authority provided that the Church’s supremacy is recognized and that it is primary to one’s loyalty to the king’s command: “for the lawe of god and the decrees of the churche: must nedely be kepte / rather than th contrarie commaundement of any souereyne” (127). Whitford’s definition of monastic obedience simply places these claims of submission within a the context of the enclosure:

Obedience is a wylful and vtter abnegacion and forsaking of proper wyll / and an obligacion or bounde vnto the wyl of the souereyne / in all thynges that ben lawfull and reasonable / accordyng to the rules / constitucions / and ordinaunces / of that order or that religion. (127)

Aside from the additional requirement of the brothers or sisters to bind themselves to the “rules / constitutions / and ordinaunces” of their order, which replaces the obedience
owed to secular authorities, these two definitions are indistinguishable. Moreover, the placement of and similarity between “general” and “religious” obedience57 within the text is indicative of Whitford’s understanding of this notion as a distinctly monastic virtue which has value for others. That the brother understands obedience as primarily a monastic vow but is eager to have it apply universally to all Christians is further suggested in his general discussion of this vow in which he draws on numerous exempla from lay society to illustrate an argument. For example, in his chapter on the diversities of obedience,58 Whitford positions religious obedience as the most meritorious, since the monk’s more rigorous vow was willingly entered into by the brother and is therefore done “for his owne pleasure” (128) against the obedience owed by “any Christian” (129), which must obey God’s ordinances on account of his or her baptism. Thus, although frequently referencing the more general notion of obedience, Whitford’s inclusive language only re-inscribes the priority of the monastic vow as the standard by which one may articulate its more general application. Whitford’s monastically inflected notion of obedience is noteworthy, however, since it provides him with an orthodox response to Tyndale’s authoritarian and patriarchal notion of obedience as the submission of children to parents, wives to husbands, servants to masters and subjects to kings, princes and rulers.59

57 These are the terms that Whitford uses to distinguish the obedience owed by a monk between that owed by a secular Christian (see 126-27).
58 Whitford isolates four types of obedience based on whether one submits to authority out of pleasure, profit, need or dread.
59 This chain of familial and political obedience is set out by Tyndale in the segment entitled “The obedience of all degrees” in The Obedience of a Christian Man. Within this segment, Tyndale discusses the different forms of obedience under the following rubrics: “The obedience of wives unto their husbands,” The obedience of servants unto their masters” and lastly “The obedience of subjects unto kings, princes and rulers” (34-49). Tyndale swiftly turns to effacing the spiritual authority claimed by the papacy in the following chapter, “Against the Pope’s false power” (49-59). Eager to eclipse other notions of obedience in The Obedience of a Christian Man, Tyndale occasionally alludes to monastic obedience as a way to further
What emerges from Whitford’s discussion of obedience is an orthodox alternative to Tyndale’s tract with important theological and political ramifications. For Whitford, obedience is, at first glance paradoxically, equated with freedom since submission to ecclesiastical authorities entails the security of a society governed by rules that are “due and lawfull / and also also lawfull and reasonable” (127). One need not fear, according to Whitford’s model, disobeying the sovereign’s will if it is unethical, since another authority exists beside it to which one can theoretically appeal. This vision of the commonwealth is neatly summed up in his frequently employed tag the “wel ordered people of god,” and directly opposes Tyndale’s vision, in which, according to Whitford, apparent freedom from the pope or the clergy results in tyranny, since authority resides solely in the sovereign. In place of Tyndale’s model, Whitford offers a system of checks and balances in which clerical and princely authority offset one another. Whitford points to this more balanced distribution of power when he affirms that the “thynge that is nat lawfull and reasonable... may neuer be done by any mener of obedience” (127).

This vision of an alternative hierarchy is further elaborated when Whitford explicitly addresses the issue of to whom obedience is due. Like Tyndale, Whitford reproduces the traditional patriarchal model whereby “children bene bounde... vnto the fathers and mothers” and “the subiectes of every realme: vnto thyr kynges and prynces” (139-40). Yet, to this hierarchy of secular power Whitford appends clerical authority by insisting from the beginning that “al christianes” owe obedience to “the Pope / the

set off his definition as different. For example, in the first page of the prologue, Tyndale’s own marginal comment attaches the following gloss to the “obedience that is of God”: “The obedience of monks and friars is not here. For they are not of God but of their own feigning” (26). Other instances in which Tyndale uses monastic obedience as a foil for an obedience “that is of God” occurs on pages 33, 37, 41, 147 and 155.
bysshopes / curates / and suche other” (139). Whitford is equally forthright in
proclaiming that the model offered by the reformers amounts to nothing more than
“moste cruell tyranny” (142) in which “the spiritualte as well as the temporalte: muste in
every realme be obedient vnto the laws of the same... kynge or prynce” (147). With no
other political entity to restrain the secular authorities, they are, Whitford underscores,
free to “byd and commaunde prohibitte or forbde without ryme or reason” (148). Over
the course of Whitford’s discussion of monastic obedience in the Pype, readers are led to
see how this virtue, one of the three “essenciall vowes” of religious life (4), may provide
an alternative model of Christian obedience to the one advanced by Tyndale.

Such an adaptation of an ideal of religious discipline to a national context is
unusual, although later controversialists would follow in Whitford’s footsteps.60

Whitford’s original adaptation of monastic discipline to new contexts in order to confront
a variety of issues both inside and outside the cloister distinguishes his work. However,
this innovative application of elements of religious life to serve his own conservative
pastoral agenda is not unique to the Pype. In his Werke for Houholders, Whitford
transposes cloaustral discipline onto the domestic household to promote models of piety

60 In his discussion of the evolution of Henry VIII’s political theology of obedience, Richard Rex points out
that the “relocation” of obedience within a monastic context was a tactic adopted by conservatives (863)
and cites Stephen Gardiner’s De vera obedientia (1535) as the classic example of this conservative strategy
of advancing a doctrine more in line with its own theological agenda. Although, Rex notes, Gardiner had
renounced his allegiance to the pope, he was concerned that royal supremacy “might become the first step
towards Protestantism” (886). Gardiner’s agenda thus focused mainly on salvaging England’s catholic
tradition. Published one year after the Act of Supremacy in 1534 and three years after Whitford’s Pype in
1532, Gardiner’s text and its adaptation of monastic obedience is nevertheless taken as seminal by critics.
This is not only the case in Rex’s “Crisis of Obedience” but also in Glyn Redworth’s In Defence of the
Church Catholic: The Life of Stephen Gardiner. However, scholars overlook the possibility that
Whitford’s discussion of obedience could have exercised any direct influence over the younger Gardiner.
Although clearly diverging from the Pype in its support for royal authority, Gardiner’s account of
obedience integrates, as Redworth and Rex note, “the Lutheran account of obedience with the monastic
tradition of obedience” (Rex, “Crisis” 886; see also Redworth 65-6).
that not only ensure readers’ conformity to orthodox practice, but also firmly guide their own inward private devotions.

**A Monastic Reformation of the Household in Whitford’s *Werke for Housholders***

In addition to admonishing a return to traditional forms of discipline to restore the spiritual wellbeing of the religious houses and defend the value the claustral living, Whitford is equally zealous in promoting forms of piety that mirror monastic custom to those residing in secular households. Yet, when the *Werke* had begun to circulate, a long tradition of transferring elements of monasticism into the aristocratic household had existed for centuries: many members of the nobility, such as Cecily, duchess of York, who modelled her pattern of living on the monastic day, attempted to adapt the devotional culture of the cloister to the secular household. occasional comparisons that Whitford makes between these two types of communities throughout the *Pype* strongly suggest that an association existed in the brother’s mind. In his *Werke for Housholders*, Whitford turns his attention exclusively writing a programmatic guide aimed at the noble household, whose members included the lord’s family servants and followers. Viewing it as another venue for reform, he takes advantage of the householder’s traditional receptivity to good counsel and proffers advice that re-imagines the secular household as a quasi-monastic community that can be exploited to promote forms of private devotion that carefully immure its practitioners within traditional, orthodox piety.

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61 On the transferral of monastic devotions into the household on the part of aristocrats, such as Cecily, see Phillips, esp. 151, and Mertes.

62 In his discussion of the enforcement of periods of silence within the monastery in the *Pype*, Whitford notes the similarity of customs observed within the monastery to those of the royal household (see 110-11).
Whitford’s targeting the household as the beneficiary of his systematic adaptation of religious devotional custom is certainly a strategic decision. Medieval householders were particularly vulnerable to individuals such as Whitford who sought to provide moral advice. As Greg Walker notes, in order to project an image of himself as a good ruler, a noble was forced to promote an image of “a stable, well-ordered household in which good counsel was readily offered and readily heeded” (Politics 65). Walker as well notes that within medieval and early modern households massive investments were made on artwork and reading which aimed at moral improvement (Persuasive Fictions 104). Partly stemming from a humanist ideal promoted by Erasmus that “the entire fabric of the royal or noble household should contribute to the moral education of the patron and his guests” (Persuasive Fictions 100), this desire to moralize the household space is exploited by Whitford, who would have likely shared his associates’ attitudes, as a fertile ground amenable to his comprehensive programme of reform.

The noble household was an equally advantageous site for reform on account of its position as a basic institution of late medieval and early modern society. Like prestigious religious foundations, households often contained close to one hundred members. Indeed, despite the massive reduction in the scope of its importance from the early Middle Ages up to the Reformation, the household’s position as society’s “fundamental building block remained unchallenged.” Moreover, the medieval aristocracy’s traditional fidelity to ecclesiastical authority made this group especially

63 Of course there were exceptional cases of households belonging to high-ranking aristocrats which contained well over a hundred members. For example, in 1468 George, duke of Clarence approved an ordinance that would have made his household the largest known for any medieval nobleman. At an annual cost of £4500, there were to have been at least 399 staff.

64 Gies 295. In their history of the development of the medieval family, Frances and Joseph Gies also note that households retained their importance even though “craft guilds, national governments and armed forces, schools and universities had [all]... impinged on the family’s economic, social, and educational roles” (295-96).
important to the transmission of orthodox piety. In her discussion of medieval aristocracy, Kate Mertes argues that the majority of aristocrats shared similar attitudes toward religion and believed that “obedience to the church’s teachings and disciplines went hand in hand with acceptance of the social structure and of aristocratic authority, and assumed that one reinforced the other” (“Aristocracy” 57). As a result, the households of nobles, like monastic enclosures, played a decisive role in maintaining the traditional religious identity of a rural parish. As Jonathon Hughes notes, elite families, along with cathedral chapters and fraternities, shared with the monastery the obligation of “conducting religious services [and] providing patronage for religious artists.”

Shedding further light on the importance of the household to local religious life in the latter Middle Ages, Mertes examines the ever-increasing devotional activity that was located in the household. Mertes argues that such clerical patronage, whether done out of “obligation, self-aggrandizement, or personal piety,” allowed the aristocracy to use their households both “as passive organisers of such practices as the daily office, mass, and prayers for the dead, and also as active participants in these, adding their prayers and good works to the Lord’s” (“Household” 123).

Yet, in addition to nurturing the spiritual lives of those within the household, such patronage served less pious ends as well. For example, Mertes comments on the efficacy of these offices in socializing those in the lord’s service. Servants and retainers, he notes, “may have been motivated to attend the household mass provided for them because it re-affirmed each day their place in the community around which most of their lives

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65 Hughes 10. Hughes provides a detailed discussion of the spiritual responsibilities as well as of the many different ways they patronized the local clergy by drawing on abundant individual accounts. See further 5-63.
As well as the role such practices played in reinscribing one’s position within a social hierarchy, the household, as Whitford recognized, was nevertheless an important instrument in promoting the Catholic faith among the laity.

Owing to the originality of the text, particularly its comprehensive and systematic structuring of a devout regimen for householders, demand for the Werke was high, and in 1530 it was published by Wynkyn de Worde. Offering a practical consideration of how to adapt a disciplined piety reminiscent of the cloister to the equally demanding timetable that governed a secular household, Whitford’s text, as Helen White notes, stands as a “pioneer undertaking” since it tries to “envisage the circumstances of the ordinary Christian who is forced to perform his devotions under the often distracted conditions of the large and crowded household” (157). However, while White affirms that the importance of the text lies in its “sympathy” with the trials of integrating such a comprehensive set of spiritual exercises onto the daily routines of managing an estate, I wish to suggest that the Werke’s meticulous adaptation of monastic discipline to a domestic community reshapes the household as a site for orthodox devotion occurring outside the immediate oversight of clerical authorities. The stress on establishing rigid patterns of behaviour that occupied almost every moment of the individual’s day to facilitate his or her proper formation as a devout Catholic demonstrates how Whitford

66 “Household” 130. On the aristocracy’s willingness to exploit these practices for the glorification of the lord, see Phillips.

67 While Whitford’s work is, as most scholars agree, quite innovative, the genre in which it was written dates back to antiquity. Xenophon’s Oeconomicus, which was translated by Gentian Hervet in 1532 as a Treatise of Household and which merges a discussion of the oikos (family or household) with didactic material on agriculture, is largely unrelated to the Werke. More proximate, although still distant, are the guides for devotional life of the layperson such as the Contemplation of Synners for Every Day in the Week published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1499. Helen White’s The Tudor Books of Private Devotion provides detailed discussions of a range of subgenres of devotional literature in the Tudor age.

68 While Hogg speculates that the Werke was written before Whitford entered Syon Abbey (Hogg, Introductory Study 142), there is no evidence to support this claim. The exact date of the text’s composition is unknown.
exploited this social unit—which for him appears to be the institution in the secular world that most closely resembles the cloister—to ensure that the increasingly elaborate forms of piety which encouraged frequent meditative withdrawal remained within the limits of orthodoxy.

Whereas earlier devotional works aimed at laypeople focused on the individual’s moral and spiritual rehabilitation through set prayers and meditations, Whitford’s treatise aims to reach a broader audience by addressing his reader in his capacity as a householder with the many social responsibilities that entails. While this change in approach was part of an emerging trend in devotional literature, the originality of Whitford’s Werke lies in its systematic and explicit adaptation of monastic discipline to the secular household. Indeed, the closeness to which these two communities reflect one another in the text is evident in the brother’s own response to potential objections raised by future readers:

But yet some of you wyll say. Syr this werke is good for religious persones and for suche persone as ben solytary and done lye alone by them selfe... yf we shulde vse these [prayers] in presence of our felowes some wold laugh vs to scorne and mocke vs. (10)

Whitford dismisses outright such complaints that this programme is suitable only for the religious or the hermit, and responds by resituating the objection in a secular context by noting that such devotion is often required to please kings or princes (10). Whitford’s concern for everyday predicaments like those he imagines is certainly remarkable, but equally noteworthy is his choice of the household as his subject. Whereas devotional

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69 In *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion*, Helen White notes that in the early sixteenth century “for the first time there was an economic and social base for the development of that type of prayer book addressed to the middle-class man that is represented by the book for ‘householders’ that was to attract so much attention in this century and to flower so abundantly in the next” (149).

70 In *Tudor Books of Private Devotion*, Helen White argues that Whitford’s concern for “worldly considerations” is unprecedented, and goes on to claim that “in this he may be taken as the forerunner of a whole host of later sixteenth- and particularly seventeenth-century writers... who are going to try to make provision for the devotional needs of the emerging middle class” (157-8).
literature aimed at laypeople that targets moral reform is potentially relevant to everyone, Whitford chooses a hierarchical approach which assumes that once the noble is on side the positive effects of his good governance will slowly filter down to each member of the household. Thus, in selecting the householder as his intended reader, Whitford aims at a narrower audience than earlier devotional literature, which could be read by any literate person, in order to influence the lives of the devout who would not necessarily be disposed to or capable of reading such literature that were affiliated with the households of the gentry.

Whitford’s commitment to exporting an unalloyed form of devotional life is readily apparent in his advice for maintaining a pattern of living that, while common to most laypeople’s guides for leading a devout life, is set out in the Werke for Housholders with an unusual precision and occasional severity. The necessity of establishing a suitable pattern of living is present at the very beginning of the treatise. Whitford states that avoiding sin with a “good herte and constant mynde” is fundamental to being “a good christian” (3), but next in importance to this task (and essential to achieving it) is to “appoynt [onself] vnto some customable course of good and profitable exercyse” (3). As in the Pype, the relationship between these traditional and habitual exercises71 and becoming a good Christian is made explicit when he states that the intention of the work is to provide “a forme” in which to order oneself and one’s household (4). Again, such practical advice for the lay person to live more devoutly was hardly new at this point, but part of what distinguishes Whitford’s programme is the extent to which he envisions his regimen determining the daily activities of every member of the household. The

71 In the Middle English Dictionary, “customable” is defined first as customary in the sense of traditional and then as referring to a habitual action.
comprehensiveness and rigorousness demanded by the brother may be seen most clearly
in his discussion of how to make the best use of one’s leisure time on Sunday.
Addressing the reader in his capacity as householder, Whitford enjoins him to appoint
recreational activities for those in his charge “with diligence” (34) by first listing
prohibited entertainments. In addition to avoiding the tavern, his retainers should keep
away from such “vanytees as... berebayting and bulbaytyng, foteball, tenesplayeng,
bowlyng... vnlawful games of cardynge, dycynge, closshyng, with suche other vnthryfty
pastymes, or rather losetymes” (34-35). Severe as these words may appear, they shed
light on just how far Whitford re-imagines the secular household along the lines of a
religious community. 72 This is evident in his concern to account for every moment of the
individual’s day so as to prevent any “lost” time that could be better spent in some
devotional exercise. Addressing a mixed audience in the Pype, Whitford uses almost
identical language to describe activities that set apart the religious from the layperson. He
writes,

Why shulde the religious persone in auoydynge of ydlenes folowe gentilite: that
is, for theyr passetymes applie them selfe vnto veyne seculer & vnlawfull games
as decyng, carding, boulyng, tables, and teneyse with suche other: whiche games
done rather apperteine vnto gentiles than vnto christianes, nothyng framying with
good religion... for without fayle they ben spectacles of mere vanites. Whiche the
worlde callethe pastytymes and I call them waste tymes. (Pype 394)

Although Whitford uses these activities to distinguish religious and secular communities
in the Pype, he eliminates this distinction in the Werke and censures these diversions as
wholly unacceptable. In doing so, the brother conveys his desire to reform the devout

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72 Such prohibitions, however, were well known from other texts such as Dives et Pauper which, in its
exposition of the first commandment, admonishes against “bacbytynge,” “glotenye,” “lecherie,”
“dronkeschep,” and the “song & speche of rybaudye” (1: 218). Such instruction, like that offered in Dives
et Pauper, need not be monastically inflected but simply outlines a well-lived Christian life. What suggests
that Whitford may have the more monastic existence in mind is his use, almost verbatim, of the same
prohibitions in the Pype.
aristocratic household along conventual lines. Indeed, for Whitford, in good monastic fashion, legitimate pastimes must always have a spiritually edifying component as well.

Whitford’s attempt to superimpose the devotional life of the cloister onto a secular household is equally clear in his adaptation of habitual prayer, both private and communal, to the household. The brother begins at the start of the day by providing his reader with a “morowe exercise” (7), instructing him on how to cross himself correctly and then supplying him with a lengthy prayer and set of petitions in order to orient his thoughts for the day ahead. Anticipating complaints over the length of this involved morning prayer, Whitford makes no concessions. Instead, he enjoins his reader to do exactly what would be required of a religious novice, and have these prayers “incorporate and prynted in the herte and mynde” (7). The importance of memory training to the individual’s ethical formation within monastic culture has been well documented, and Whitford returns to the necessity of printing prayers and narratives onto the memory throughout the Werke. Like his monastic precursors, Whitford’s call to memorize these prayers has a strong ethical dimension. The table of major events in the life of Christ that he inserts at the end of the treatise is a perfect example of the moral value Whitford attaches to memorization. This memory aid, as I discussed in chapter one, is organized around single words which summon vivid pictures to the imagination. Such mnemonic strategies are entirely monastic: for centuries, monastic memory training had been using

73 Within monastic culture, storing such prayers in one’s memory was not only necessary for the smooth performance of the Divine Office, but also carried with it a strong sense of moral obligation since the proper formation of one’s memory was believed to have a strong influence over one’s ethical formation. Monastic attitudes towards memory are discussed in great depth in Mary Carruthers’s excellent study of memory in the Middle Ages, The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture.
lively images as mnemonics to imprint texts onto the memory. Whitford uses these same tactics, albeit in a simplified form, for his own “table of remembraunce” (54). As with traditional monastic memory training, learning this table is primarily a tool for the individual’s moral formation—to assist him or her “to exclude vyce and also to encreace in vertue and grace” (62). Placed at the end of this short treatise, Whitford’s mnemonic exercise, so evocative of the cloister, is an appropriate conclusion to a work in which the devotional life of the monastery is adapted to the secular household.

Whitford further brings domestic life into conformity with the cloister by arranging a strict routine of fixed prayers that would reinforce the essential doctrines of Catholicism several times throughout the day. Recitation and exposition of basic Christian prayers during mealtime as well as the use of a simplified liturgy are two crucial ways the brother achieves this aim. Just as Thomas More universalizes reading at meals in his *Utopia*, Whitford transposes this monastic custom to the contemporary household in a practical way. Advising the householder to have his exposition on the Paternoster, the Ave Maria and the Creed read “at euery mele” (18), the ever-pragmatic brother recommends this habit since it ensures that all members of the household learn these prayers, especially old servants “abasshed to lerne it openly” as well as those who are “dullards and slothful... [or] negligent and careles” (19). Unlike More, who imagines a population eagerly attentive to the words of daily moral readings, Whitford’s programme is far more practical in nature. In order to fully instruct and indoctrinate in each member of the household, these prayers, which contain the fundamental tenets of

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74 This is especially clear in the work Hugh of St. Victor. See especially Hugh’s *De tribus maximis circumstantiis gestorum*. Carruthers includes a translation of this short text in the appendices of *The Book of Memory*; see pages 261-66.

75 Hythloday states that, like the religious of Europe, the Utopians practised communal eating which began with a moral reading. See *Utopia* 141-43.
Catholic Christianity, are said “vnder peyne of punysshment” (19) three times daily in the morning, at noon and at night. Recitation of both prayers and Whitford’s expositions is certainly far from the liturgical responsibilities of the cloister, but the motivation for rehearsing them is similar in spirit to the liturgy of the Hours. Just as, for example, prayer throughout the day helps the religious to recall that God is always present and to consider how to conduct one’s life, Whitford’s rationale focuses on the formative role such prayers have on the individual, though in simpler and more practical terms. Such conviction is conveyed explicitly when the brother concludes his discussion of shaping the “behauyour” and “maners” (12) of children by enjoining the householder to teach them to “fyrst lerne to serue god and to saye the Pater noster, Aue, and Crede” (13).

Such appropriation of memory aids based on monastic models provides Whitford with a further response to Protestantism, in this case Protestant reading. Whitford’s emphasis on rote memorization of the basic tenets of the Catholic faith enshrined in a core group of prayers and mnemonics is markedly different from the Protestants’ desire for immediate access to the Bible. In his Prologue to the 1534 New Testament, Tyndale maintains that the “nature of God’s word is, that whosoever read it or hear it... it will begin immediately to make him every day better and better, till he be grown into a perfect man” (New Testament 5). According to Tyndale, the material itself which one reads is responsible for a person’s ethical development into a “perfect” individual. For Whitford, writing in a monastic tradition, the emphasis shifts to how one reads. Given the texts that the brother recommends in the Werke, it is clear that Whitford seeks a tight control over what the laity are permitted to know, even though he urges them to take that material into

76 In the Rule, Benedict writes that the discipline of the Psalmody ought to help us “consider, then, how we ought to behave in the presence of God and his angels” (19. 217).
themselves in a more profound (and monastic) way by having these short prayers and mnemonics “redy in mynde [so that one] may lyghtly ordre and laye vp as it were tresour in a chest or cofre / al suche maters of the gospel” (54). In the *Werke*, firsthand knowledge of biblical texts is obviated by Whitford’s “table of remembraunce” which supplies the reader with a detailed conspectus of Christ’s life without having ever to read a word of the Gospels. As he does in the *Pype*, so Whitford uses monastic reading in the *Werke* to regulate his readers’ encounter with sacred texts as well as offer an alternative to Protestant reading.

The emphasis, then, that Whitford places on traditional statements of Catholic Christianity should in no way indicate that he ignored entirely the popularity of Protestantism. His gesture to reclaim practices that were held in particular favour by reformers is especially evident in the priority he accords to preaching over more traditional forms of worship. If there is a sermon at any point in the day, each member of the household, Whitford admonishes, should be present to hear it. Although preaching is by no means an exclusively Protestant activity, what is surprising is that Whitford places greater importance on hearing the Word of God than on witnessing and periodically receiving the Body of Christ: “let them euer kepe the prechynge / rather than the masse / yf (by case) they may not here bothe” (35). Helen White, the only scholar to discuss this text in detail, highlights Whitford’s recommendations for strict Sunday observance as well as the weight he places on the sermon as anticipating the religious sensibilities of the Puritans (159). Yet White’s observations, which seek to emphasize the degree to which Whitford is ahead of his time, obscures the brother’s deliberate attempt to appeal to the popularity of Protestantism. Almost every religious Order placed a significant emphasis
on preaching in the later Middle Ages. Yet, Whitford’s awareness of changes in devotional tastes demonstrates the extent to which members of elite religious communities like Syon Abbey attempted to position themselves at the forefront of the latest religious and theological developments.

Taken as whole, it becomes readily apparent how Whitford’s counsels transform the household into a type of secular religious community whose members internalize a uniform body of prayers and observe a common set of devotional exercises. Just as the *Pype* applied elements of monastic discipline to broader social and political concerns, so too does the *Werke* by adapting a fully realized pattern of claustral living to secular households. Although Whitford is nowhere as explicit as he is in the *Pype* about using monastic culture to resist Protestant attacks on Catholic doctrines and institutions, I would argue that his *Werke* was meant to serve similar ends. Whitford’s experience with elite aristocrats, such as William Blount, who would eventually welcome him into his own household after Syon’s dissolution, suggests that Whitford was fully aware of the role such magnates played in ensuring the preservation of religious practice in rural areas. Exploiting the gentry’s traditional attachment to the religious orders and their role in determining the shape of regional devotions, Whitford may have strategically targeted the aristocratic household in order to ensure the continuity of catholic Christianity in the countryside. Whitford’s strategy of resistance is ambitious since it constitutes a complete reimagining of how a household functions and of its primary aim. Whitford’s household becomes a centre of lay devotion beyond the immediate supervision of the clergy carefully governed by orthodox practices.

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77 For an excellent discussion, see Muessig.
78 On the influence of aristocratic families in shaping the devotional practices of a particular region, see Lutton 19-26.
Conclusion

Whitford’s application of monastic discipline to a range of new contexts, such as his engagement in the vernacular with Lutheran attacks against religious life, his account of a utopian Christian society in the Americas newly converted by devout friars and his refashioning of the secular household along rigidly claustral lines distinguish him as a significant late-monastic author. Until my study, scholarship on Whitford has focused primarily on his translations of a number of religious texts, his own vernacular compositions and his openness to the press as a tool for communication. Helen White, who singled out the brother as being especially “alert to the world” (182), emphasizes his recognition of the “need of putting into the vernacular various devotional treatises” and his willingness “to take advantage of the new tool of printing” (212) as his greatest achievements. J. T. Rhodes similarly examines his work in relation to broader literary trends at Syon that aimed to bring a large body of orthodox religious texts into English. However, these facets of his writing are not, in themselves, remarkable. By the 1530s religious and non-religious authors had been writing devotional works in English for over a century: Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady as well as the large body of his shorter pastoral works are perfect examples of this. In order to take scholarship on Whitford forward, my discussion has sought to read Whitford’s innovative adaptations of monastic discipline
critically as a means to promote rigidly orthodox forms of piety in a period of increasing dissent.

Whitford’s particular application of monastic customs, especially in the *Werke for Housholders*, places the brother’s writing in a narrow continuum of individuals that spanned the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which included such authors as Lydgate and More: these figures, I have argued, sought to export different elements of claustral discipline to control the growing diffusion of lay devotional practices and their movement away from the direct oversight of the clergy. Whitford’s efforts to reform late medieval monasticism have been explored by P. G. Caraman. My study has expanded on Caraman’s discussion of Whitford as a progressive reformer by focusing instead on his adaptation of religious culture to new contexts beyond the walls of the cloister in order to make certain that the increasing literate and elaborate character of lay piety—in solitary spaces and in the communal context of the household—remained firmly within orthodox parameters. Whitford’s means for achieving this aim, as with Lydgate and More, was to exploit monastic customs to promote devotional practices that reinscribed the prestige of religious culture and an obedience to ecclesiastical authority.
Chapter Five

“In ye secret chambre of the mynde / in the preuy closet of the sowle”:

More’s Adaptation of Monastic Discipline and Devotion in the

*Life of Pico and Utopia*

The four years that Thomas More spent among the Carthusians in London played a decisive role in shaping his devotional and literary sensibilities. Indeed, More incorporates significant elements of monastic culture into his own writing from his earliest works to those written while imprisoned in the Tower of London. Not all of these debts have gone unacknowledged. Critics have already noted a diverse range of allusions to claustal life or reminiscences of monastic reading in More’s work, such as the Utopians’ custom of having a text read aloud during a communal meal to the three-fold structure of *De Tristitia*, which recalls the meditative practice of *lectio divina*. Yet, while previous criticism has highlighted some of these smaller details within More’s work, it has continued to overlook a crucial fact of his writing—the abundant evidence of More’s systematic adaptation of different facets of monastic culture. In this chapter, I will argue that More’s borrowings from different elements of religious life are not simply interesting but isolated details; rather, they form part of a larger, more thorough attempt to adapt monastic life to the active life and must be seen in the broader context of movements within lay piety, concerns over religious dissent and the desire to control vernacular piety. Part of More’s reconfiguration of monastic life for pious laypeople, I suggest, stems from his own efforts to lead a form of mixed life, which we can clearly see in various biographical details.
This chapter will focus primarily on his programmatic use of claustral discipline in the *Life of Pico* and *Utopia*. Tapping into the still high demand for spiritual guides from lay and religious readers alike, More’s vernacular compendium, which includes translations of the *Life* and selected writings of the already renowned humanist Pico della Mirandola, enjoyed a fair measure of popularity during More’s own lifetime.¹ Yet, behind many of the alterations that More made to the original Latin version of Pico’s biography, one can, I argue, detect traces of More’s own anxiety over the popularity of private spiritual exercises as well as an attempt to contain lay reading within established, orthodox paradigms. I will then argue that monastic culture plays an equally decisive role in determining the shape of Hythloday’s ideal society in *Utopia*. While briefly noting basic structural similarities between monastic life and the strictly regulated life of the Utopians, I will focus on the similar attitudes these communities share towards education and studious, solitary repose as tools for individual formation. Finally, I will end my examination of Utopia by discussing More’s secularization of monastic practices such as *otium* in order to create a uniform society. By offering close readings of these diverse elements within the *Life of Pico* and *Utopia* and by situating the texts within the broader context of More’s experience of monasticism and his interest in forms of lay piety, I will move beyond previous scholars’ acknowledgements of basic similarities between More’s writing and the cloister. Thus, this chapter aims to understand More’s monastic debts in these texts as part of a sophisticated and methodical programme on the part of the author

¹ The *Life* was reprinted fifteen years after its original publication, and A. S. G. Edwards, who edits the *Life of Pico* for the multivolume *Yale Complete Works*, notes that the involvement of the prominent printer Wynkyn de Worde in this undertaking “suggests that More’s *Life* had established itself as a work of some popularity” by the time it was reissued in 1525 (*Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More* 1:lvi). No information survives regarding the extent to which Rastell’s edition circulated. All quotations from More’s texts, unless otherwise mentioned, are taken from *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*. 
of exporting religious culture in order to manage the spiritual aspirations of devout laypeople and to depict a society in which, as in the monastery, the aspirations of the individual are shaped by and subordinated to the ideals of the community.

The Charterhouse and the New Building: More’s adaptation of the religious life

In William Roper’s *Lyfe of Sir Thomas More, knighte*,2 we are told that, during his time as a Reader at Furnival’s Inn, More “gaue himselfe to devotion and prayer in the Charterhouse of London, religiously lyvinge there, without vowe, about iiiijer yeares” (6). Although Roper devotes only one sentence to this period in More’s early life, the impact of his experience with the Carthusians at the House of the Salutation would leave an indelible mark on More’s subsequent thought and behaviour. More departed from this community in his mid-twenties, but the enduring impact of this experience is evident, for example, in his lifelong adherence to the Carthusian practice of routine flagellation as well as the wearing the roughest possible hair-shirt beneath his clothing.3 The great esteem in which More held Carthusian monasticism resurfaces again near the end of his biography. Relating a conversation between More and his daughter Margaret, Roper records that, from his cell in the Tower of London, he chanced to see three monks of the Charterhouse being lead to the executioner’s block and made the following remarks:

what a greate difference there is betweene such as haue in effecte spent all their dayes in a straight, hard penetentiall, and paynefull life religiously, and such as

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2 The date Roper composed his *Life of More* remains uncertain. In her introduction to the EETS edition, Elsie Vaughn Hitchcock notes that Roper most likely wrote the text “some twenty years after More’s death, certainly not before Mary’s reign—it was dangerous to circulate, or even to write, such memoirs earlier”. She estimates that the biography was written not long before 1557, the date of publication of More’s *English Works* (xlv).

3 See Roper 48-49. For an account of this custom as practiced by the Carthusians, see Lionel Butler and Chris Given-Wilson, *Medieval Monasteries of Great Britain*, 39-41.
haue in the world, like worldly wretches, as thy poore father [hath] done, consumed all theyr tyme in pleasure and ease licentiouslye. (80-81)

Although More’s comment concerning his own dissolute life seems like a conventionally pious remark often uttered near the end of one’s life, there is no reason to suspect that his esteem for the Carthusians is not genuine. Even if Roper recorded these words only to bring the protagonist of his biography into greater conformity to the role of condemned martyr, More’s statement still conveys his admiration for the austere life of the Carthusians, which he saw as the source of their resolve. In addition to serving as one expression of More’s lifelong fascination with monastic culture, these words also convey his conviction regarding the ethical benefits that may accrue from a rigid and solitary life directed inwards in contemplation. More’s attribution of the Carthusians’ resolution to defy royal authority in order to uphold religious orthodoxy as well as their “straight... life” in the cloister links their fidelity to religious tradition with a life disciplined along claustral lines. Although this association is made at the end of his life, it is, I will argue, already present in early works such as the *Life of Pico*. Sensitive to More’s affinity for monastic discipline, Thomas Stapleton (1535-1598), and later Cresacre More (1572-1649), write that in his youth he had an “ardent desire” to lead a religious life and thought of becoming a Franciscan. Although Stapleton’s biography must be situated within a recusant context as an attempt to have More canonized and as forming part of an

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4 All quotations from Stapleton are taken from Philip E. Hallett’s translation of Thomas Stapleton’s *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*. In addition to his desire to enter a religious order, More, Stapleton tells us, led an extremely austere life as a youth by, among other things, sleeping on the ground with a log as a pillow and limiting himself to five hours of sleep per night, as well as observing frequent vigils and fasts (Stapleton 8). In *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore Lord high Chancellour of England*, Cresacre More notes that in addition to living at the London Charterhouse four years More “had an earnest minde also to be a Franciscan Fryer” (1631, 29).
orthodox alternative to Foxe’s Protestant historiography. More himself does tell us that there is no order “more holy” than the Friars Minor. Although unable himself to commit to any one form of religious life, More nevertheless drew upon the ideals of claustral life to shape his own life and to serve as a firm guide those of his readers.

This formative period in More’s youth has recently drawn much critical attention. On the extreme end of the scholarly spectrum stand Geoffrey Elton and Richard Marius, who see More’s decision not to take holy orders as the pivotal event in his youth which would haunt him for the rest of his life. Whether or not we accept such claims, Elton and Marius are, I believe, correct in drawing attention to the importance of More’s stay at the London Charterhouse. Indeed, despite his decision to leave the Carthusians and marry Jane Colt, More continued to observe many of the routines and spiritual exercises observed in the cloister. Especially important is his dedication to solitary withdrawal for the purpose of prayer and study. In his Life of More, Roper notes,

And because he was desirous for godlye purposes sometime to be solitary, and sequester himself from worldly company, A good distaunce from his mansion house builded he a place called the newe buildinge, wherein there was a Chappell, a library, and a gallery; ... So on the Fridaie there vsually contynewed he from

5 William Sheils discusses the immediate context of Stapleton’s Tres Thomae in “Polemic as Piety: Thomas Stapleton’s Tres Thomae and Catholic Controversy in the 1580s.”
6 In his letter to an unnamed monk, More writes “by no means was the Order of Minors established more rightly. Unless opinion deceives me, there is no order holier, and it is nevertheless on account of a good many reasons that they have spread throughout the whole world [...haud satis recte institus est Ordo Minoritarum, quo ( nisi me fallit opinio) nullus est ordo sanctior, quorum plaerique tamen idoneis de causis, totum peruagantur orbem)” (The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More 201 / 1357-1360 my translation).
7 Until recently critics had neglected this important period in More’s life. An example of this omission may be found in Logan’s The Meaning of More’s Utopia in which he contends that More’s intellectual formation ought to be investigated by examining his debts to the classics as well as to the humanists, and claims, “[a]lthough More’s thought was of course partly shaped by his experience as an Englishman... the explication of his thought requires only sporadic reference to that experience” (260).
8 See Elton 3: 353-55 and Marius, Thomas More 34-43. Both Elton and Marius speculate that More’s decision to marry engendered a tremendous amount of grief for him because it meant that he could not live a chaste life, which was considered the purest form of Christian living. While Elton reasons that since More “throughout his life proved himself to be a passionate man... it would have been strange if he had not also known the passions of the flesh” (3: 353), Marius argues that More’s “decision to marry must have been agonizing” (Thomas More 35) but similarly omits to provide any concrete evidence to support his claim beyond extrapolations regarding medieval attitudes towards virginity.
morning till evening, spending his tijme only in devoute praiers and spirituall
excercises. (25-26)

Although Friday remained a day of special reverence among the devout on account of the
Passion, More’s piety was extreme even in his own day. Such concerted effort to retreat
from the public world into his private space has continued to attract the attention of
contemporary scholars as well. In More’s desire for meditative retreat, Stephen
Greenblatt locates the seeds of what he sees as a source for the “strategy of imagined self-
cancellation” which, he argues, is present throughout Utopian society (45). More
recently, Amy Boesky comments that More’s retreat from the world is an important
factor that shapes his own domestic pedagogical programme, within which he included
his wife as well as his children. By drawing attention to the role that this private retreat
played in his and his family’s educational and moral development as well as on the
formation of Utopian society, Boesky gestures towards a fuller recognition of just how
important More considered such periods of withdrawal, which strongly resemble
monastic *otium*, to individual formation and to the cohesion of family and community. If
viewed as an adaptation of this monastic practice, it is no longer so surprising that More
would include his wife and children in his retreats. Overseeing the spiritual wellbeing of
the family, as I note in Chapter Four, was seen as a pious householder’s responsibility—
especially in a period of increasing religious controversy.

9 In *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, Stapleton dilates Roper’s account of More’s
habit of retreating to his New Building and includes additional information on the numerous pious practices
he built into his daily routine. See especially 61-70.
10 Boesky cites More’s insistence that his wife and children participate in such “contemplative pursuits,”
recounted by Roper, as examples of how More, like his Utopians, yoked “the domestic and the pedagogic”
(33). See further Boesky 31-40.
Tracing the genealogy of this practice of private retreat back to traditional religious observances, we can see that it is only one among many elements of monastic culture that More exported from the cloister. Participating in the religious life of the Carthusians at the House of the Salutation, More, as Roper tells us, took part in the spiritual excises of the order, “religiously lyvinge” among them (6). Statutes which limited visits and retreats to the Charterhouse to ten days were not in effect at the time More resided with the brothers, so his prolonged stay at the abbey need not be seen as exceedingly unusual. Indeed, More was not the only layperson who shared in the rigorous life of these monks. In the early sixteenth century, the London Charterhouse housed a number of conversi, lay brothers who entered a religious Order and participated in almost every aspect of the religious life of the monks without ever formally taking vows. As part of his life there, More would have no doubt spent a considerable amount of time secluded in his cell for fixed periods of intellectual leisure, monastic otium, which would have enabled him to engage in the meditative reading programme of the brothers, lectio divina. While the observance of such practices became progressively less common in late medieval England, the Carthusians alone were the most successful of the

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12 Monastic houses accepted conversi primarily to assist in manual labour and the managing of temporal affairs. See further “Conversi” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. On the conversi at the London Charterhouse, Hendricks includes a brief discussion of six exceptional brothers who dwelt there during the time of More (109-112). Of the potential types of laypeople who lived in close contact with monks in monastic spaces (employees, corrodians, pensioners, as well as long- and short-term boarders), the Carthusians at the House of the Salutation in London did not permit anyone within its precincts who was not a member of the Order. In 1490 the general chapter relaxed this exclusiveness by permitting the construction of a house within its bounds for “one was not a member of their Order” (E. Thompson 311). Thompson speculates that his dwelling may have been made exclusively for More, although there is no evidence to support such a claim (see 312).

13 See, for example, Illich’s discussion of the disappearance of lectio divina after the twelfth century in *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* 61-65, as well as Stock’s discussion of the same phenomenon in “Lectio divina e lectio spiritualis: La scrittura come pratica comtemplativa nel Medioevo” 169-83.
monastic orders in maintaining this ancient custom. The contemplative reading practices of the Carthusians in England have been well-documented, and it was here that More likely developed a taste for monastic reading that is manifested in his later works.

Imprisoned in the Tower of London during the final year of his life, More composed a series of religious works, some of which exhibit a resurgence of the deep influence that monastic reading had on his writing. Among the texts believed to have been written in his prison cell, the Treatise on the Passion and A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation bear the most visible marks of this influence by displaying the imprint of the monastic reading practice of lectio divina, which plays a special role in determining the shape of these texts in very fundamental ways. More’s unfinished exegetical Treatise on the Passion draws significantly both in its content and in its form from meditative reading practices of cloister. Garry E. Haupt’s excellent introduction to this text discusses in exacting detail the numerous influences of monastic literary culture on the Treatise. More’s Dialogue of Comfort also reveals strong debts to a sophisticated monastic reading culture. Written as a dialogue between two Hungarians in Buda on the eve of invasion by Ottomans, this vernacular work is primarily concerned with how the Christian in general should act to maintain his or her beliefs in the face of persecution. Although its three books proceed from a discussion of the benefits of tribulation to culminate in nothing less than a treatise on meditation, since, as Louis Martz points out, More “advises what topics to seek out and... shows by brief examples how to meditate

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14 Most scholarly attention on the contemplative writings of the English Carthusians has focused on the texts produced at the monastery at Sheen, founded by Henry V in 1415, that served as a centre for the transmission of devotional texts to vernacular audiences. For an overview of the literary productions at Sheen, see Knowles, The Religious Orders in England 3: 212-21. Concerning the Carthusian involvement with and production of vernacular texts, see Cré. For a recent discussion questioning the assumption that Carthusian authors or scribes wrote directly for lay audiences, see Gillespie, “The Haunted Text: Ghostly Reflections in A Mirror to Devout People” 129-172.
upon” traditional themes of *contemptus mundi*, the Last Things, and the Passion (*CW* 12: lxxvii). Moreover, with nearly five hundred quotations or specific references to scripture in the *Dialogue*, Martz argues that these references form associative links that “revolve about a number of crucial concerns” More had while in prison and do not necessarily contribute directly to the narrative (*CW* 12: cxlviii-cxlix). Martz argues that the discursive habits which create these chains of associations result from a sustained engagement in *lectio divina*.

In addition to noting his commitment to meditative reading, scholarship has already pointed out many of the allusions and references More makes to monastic life that I discuss below. My chapter aims to build on the different connections that critics have made in the past by offering a thorough investigation of the clear links between the contemplative life he was a part of at the House of the Salutation and the manner in which it shaped his adult life as well as his earlier literary endeavours. More’s construction of the New House on his estate at Chelsea is simply one of many biographical examples of how he reconfigured significant elements of life in the cloister to life in the public realm.¹⁵

More’s adaptation of monastic life to secular life, however, extends beyond his private behaviour and his interest in *lectio divina*: the rich devotional life which he partook of among the Carthusians is, I argue, redeployed in the *Life of Pico* as well as *Utopia* in order to provide models for a pious or an intellectually rigorous life that upholds ecclesiastical and political authority, respectively. Monastic devotional practices

¹⁵ Other examples supplied by Roper of More’s adaptation of monastic customs include his lengthy private prayer (26), a communal prayer with his family that consisted of “seuen Psalmes, letany and suffrages” (25), a nightly prayer with his family at his chapel to say “certeine psalmes and collectes with them” (25) in addition to wearing a hair shirt (48) as well as periodic mortification of the flesh (49),
provided More with the tools to accomplish this important, culturally conservative agenda. Thus, like Elton and Marius, I attach significant weight to More’s formative experience at the London Charterhouse; however, unlike past scholarship, which has viewed More’s subsequent life as a struggle to cope with a perceived failure to follow a religious vocation, I will argue that More’s writing reveals a careful attempt to transpose the rigour of an ideally conceived monastic life onto one firmly rooted in the secular world in order to serve as tool for social control. More’s texts which demonstrate monastic influence are precisely those which concern the prescribed ordering of the reader’s spiritual or, in the case of Utopia, civic life to ensure an orthodox and obedient subject. No work better illustrates More’s adaptation of monastic life in order to confine its readers’ spiritual aspirations within well-defined boundaries than his rewriting of Gianfrancesco’s Vita Ioannis Pici Mirandulae. In this chapter, I will argue that More’s Life of Pico secularizes a pattern of life closely modelled on one bound to a religious order. The alterations More makes to the Latin biography are fundamental and serve to re-invent the protagonist as a pious layperson desiring to partake in the devout life. In addition to his refashioning of Pico through the addition and deletion of material, More also transforms the text into a work of devotional literature, in part by altering the ordinatio of the text in order to facilitate devotional readings that underwrite the authority and pre-eminence of religious life. I will thus argue that these changes are part of More’s larger programme to create a vernacular compendium of texts by the Italian humanist that—by counselling detachment from the world and interior ethical reform through a form of retreat reminiscent of otium—direct its readers away from the dangers of religious dissention which, in part, manifested itself in the resurgence of Lollardy in
Tudor England. I will also consider how More remolds monastic practices to create an idealized ethical and compliant society in *Utopia*. As in the *Life of Pico*, More, I argue, draws once again on the notion of *otium* as a tool for individual formation which functions to contain the Utopians’ intellectual endeavours within strict parameters, and in this way *Utopia* may be seen as a pendant to the *Life*. Finally, I will conclude my chapter by suggesting that a recognition of the importance of religious life to More and of the different ways that he remodelled monastic practices to serve his own orthodox theological agendas can shed additional light on the proximity of attitudes towards reading that would later be labelled “humanist” to those of the monastery.

**The Life of Pico: More’s Monastic Refashioning of a Humanist Life**

While still a resident at the London Charterhouse, More came to the conclusion, Stapleton tells us, that “it was not for him to aspire to the more perfect state of life” of a religious vocation (9). However, despite having determined to leave the monastic enclosure, More “earnestly resolved never to cease, throughout the whole of his life, to worship God with most sincere devotion.” The sincere devotion which Stapleton’s remarks ascribe to More must certainly point to his daily observances of many of the spiritual exercises practised in the cloister, since it was a similar integration of secular and religious life which first attracted More to Pico della Mirandola. Both Stapleton and Cresacre More suggest that for the young More, Pico served as an exemplum of a

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16 On the resurgence of Lollardy under the Tudors, see Rex, *Lollardy* 112-15.
religious life lived in the world: the former notes how Pico functioned as a “prominent layman, on which he might model his life,”\textsuperscript{18} while the latter, echoing this sentiment, claims that Pico served as a “pattern in life... famous for virtue, and most eminent for learning” (C. More 27). Desiring to adapt a religious vocation to life outside of the cloister, More could not have chosen a better exemplar than the Earl of Mirandola, whose monkish manner of living was well known among Italian contemporaries.\textsuperscript{19}

While the specific period when More began his translation of Gianfrancesco’s \textit{Vita} can never be known for certain,\textsuperscript{20} the circumstances which inspired this work are much less elusive, and hint at other factors which motivated More’s creation of this vernacular guide to devout living. My approach, however, departs from a long history of scholarly consensus regarding the text’s composition. According to Stapleton, More’s purpose in translating these works “was not so much to bring these [texts] to the knowledge of others, though that too he had in view, as thoroughly to familiarize himself with them.”\textsuperscript{21} Since Stapleton, critics have viewed More’s composition of the \textit{Life of Pico} as having a significant influence on him at a crucial stage in his life—but just what that is

\textsuperscript{18} Stapleton, \textit{Life and Illustrious Martyrdom} 9. The original text reads: “Statuit igitur aliquam sibi praeclarum virum ex ordine Laicorum ante oculos ponere, ad cuius exemplum vitam suam conformaret” (7).

\textsuperscript{19} In a letter dated 14 June 1489, Lorenzo de Medici writes the following to Lanfredini, the Florentine ambassador at Rome: “The Earl of Mirandula has taken up his residence here, and lives as devoutly as if he were a monk. He has written, and continues to write, theological works of great value; he comments on the Psalms, says the office regularly, fasts and is continent. He lives very simply and expects only the minimum of service. He seems to me to be a model for everyone.” Quoted in E. E. Reynolds, \textit{Saint Thomas More} 52-53.

\textsuperscript{20} One tradition links its date of composition near to its publication date of 1510 in John Rastall’s edition. In the \textit{English Works} of 1557, William Rastell states that the \textit{Life of Pico} “was translated oute of latin, into Englishe by master Thomas More, anout yé yeare of our Lorde .1510” (sig. a1). Another tradition, linked to biographical accounts in Stapleton and Cresacre More’s lives of More, centres on his decision to use Pico as an exemplum of secular living and thus locates the date of composition sometime between 1504 and 1505. For discussions of the latter view, see Sylvester 29-42; E. E. Reynolds, \textit{The Field Is Won} 44-45; G. Parks 358.

remains a matter of contention. While scholars such as Stanford E. Lehmberg have looked to the *Life of Pico* as providing some insight into why More abandoned a religious vocation by arguing that Pico’s *Life* may have “provided More with a justification for [his] decision” to leave the Charterhouse (Lehmberg 61–74; Fox 31), I would suggest that More did not approach his material as passively as has thus far been assumed. Instead, I argue that More utilized Gianfrancesco’s humanist text as well as Pico’s own writing in order to craft a devotional guide for both laymen and laywomen. That More used these materials to create a manual outlining the best way to lead a pious life is suggested in his dedication to Joyce Lee,22 the sister of More’s friend and future archbishop of York, Edward Lee. There More explains to the recently consecrated Poor Clare that the book, which is a New Years present, aims at the “encreace of virtue in your soule,” on behalf of the author who desires “to have you godly prosperous” (*CW* 1: 51). Although it may seem, at first glance, inappropriate to dedicate the life of a layman to a young woman who had just entered the House of the Minoresses at Aldgate,23 guides to pious living that focused on adapting the routines and discipline of religious living to secular life were often read by lay and cloistered readers alike.24 More’s dedication also suggests an explanation for his use of the vernacular. Ostensibly aimed at one recently consecrated woman, More’s vernacular compendium, twice printed in the author’s life, was accessible to diverse groups of laywomen and laymen seeking instruction on how to lead a more pious life.

22 While most scholars agree that Joyce Lee, the sister of Edward, is the most likely candidate for More’s dedication, this position has been challenged in the past. For a brief discussion of this debate about the recipient’s identity, see A. S. G. Edwards, “Life of Pico,” *CW* 1: xl.


24 In her discussion of the survival of guides to pious living in manuscripts which were directed towards female readers, Nicole R. Rice notes that such material was often copied for aristocratic women in either wealthy households or nunneries (138).
More’s *Life of Pico*, whose title is somewhat misleading, is really an anthology which functions as a vernacular guide to devout living. Consisting of the *Vita Ioannis Pici Mirandulae* written by the Italian’s nephew Gianfrancesco, translations of three of Pico’s letters (two to Gianfrancesco himself and one to Andrea Corneo), his commentary on Psalm 15, and two sets of twelve counsels for leading a good life and for being a good lover of God, More’s compendium offers its readers a model for transposing elements of the discipline and devotional culture of religious life onto a secular context. Indeed, in manuscripts owned by laypeople that contained a diverse body of devotional material, it was not unusual to find a vernacular *vita* at the beginning of such a collection which would implicitly embody a type of rule outlining the behaviour expected from pious readers.25 Yet, More utilizes Gianfrancesco’s humanist text as well as Pico’s own writing to craft a devotional guide for laypeople that sets cautious limits on ambitions to enrich their spiritual lives. Much of this work is accomplished by More’s transformation of Pico from controversial thinker to pious scholar, which is largely reflected in his descriptions of Pico’s pious reading habits, but this agenda is also present in the letters as well as the commentary and poems that he translates in the anthology. Each of these texts is carefully chosen and conveys a strictly orthodox set of instructions for the layperson or religious attempting to lead a more devout life. Thus, whereas scholarship has traditionally viewed the text as providing More with the impetus to leave the Charterhouse, I argue that More’s alterations to the *Vita*, coupled with his inclusion of selected texts by Pico, are part of systematic effort to adapt elements of monastic devotional culture in order to

produce a doctrinally conservative vernacular guide for pious Christians that may be seen as More’s earliest involvement in issues related to lay worship.26

More’s refashioning of Gianfrancesco’s encomiastic Vita into a work of contemplative literature to be read in a manner not unlike the sacred reading of the cloister is evident in his alterations to the organization of narrative material. Unlike his source text, which recounts Pico’s life in an uninterrupted sequence of events,27 More’s Life divides its material into discrete units with individual headings. The devotional slant More gives to the layout of the text has not gone unnoticed. A. S. G. Edwards notes that while More does not indicate any reason for these changes, the divisions of the text seem “consistent with the design of the work as a meditative or exemplary life appropriate for study by a religious” (CW 1: xlv). In the same vein, Edith Willow argues that the organization of the text may have facilitated its use as “community spiritual reading” and, as a result, would not have aimed only to benefit “one novice… but all the nuns in the House of the Minoresses in Aldgate” (220).

Partitioning the text into short units, while uncommon in secular lives of classical origin,28 was popular in medieval hagiography and, by the early sixteenth century, remained a common way of arranging material for devotional reading. The importance of such apparatus may be traced back to scholastic editors and compilers who, in the twelfth century, employed such tools to provide easier access to the auctoritates for the academic reader. However, such methods for arranging the text had, by the late fourteenth and early

26 John Guy provides a thorough summary of critical responses to More’s role as an unofficial inquisitor during his Chancellorship and Catholic apologist who wrote the Answer to Luther, the Dialogue Concerning Heresies, and the Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer between 1523 and 1532 (106-14).
27 It is impossible to determine for certain which edition More used as his source text, although, based on internal evidence, the Strassburg Opera Omnia of 1504 is the most likely candidate. A. S. G. Edwards notes in the appendix to the Life of Pico in the Yale Edition that Gianfrancesco’s Vita has no headings in editions of the Opera Omnia pre-dating 1510 (see further, CW 1: 292).
28 Contemporary editions of Plutarch and Suetonius present the various lives as unbroken narratives.
fifteenth centuries, spilled over into vernacular works, especially devotional works ranging from the *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God* to Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady*.\(^{29}\) Typical of contemplative texts such as the Carthusian Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* as well as Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitatio Christi*, both of which More knew,\(^{30}\) individual headings allow for the location of specific passages to be found and read in isolation from the narrative as a whole. The importance of this difference in structuring More’s *Life of Pico* is that the textual divisions allow the reader to come to the text specifically for the purpose of meditation on the events of Pico’s exemplary life. Of course, such observations regarding the purpose of these breaks in the narrative only confirm what was immediately apparent to More’s contemporaries.

Capitalizing on the demand for vernacular spiritual guides, Wynkyn de Worde’s reprint of the *Life of Pico*, c. 1525, alters Rastell’s first edition in order to underscore the text’s status as a devotional compendium. Whereas the first page of Rastell’s edition contains only a brief description of the contents of the anthology which concludes by noting that each text is “digne to be redd & oftyn to be had in memorye,” de Worde’s immediately sets More’s text apart as a devotional work with the addition of a woodcut illustration beneath this same brief account of the *Life of Pico*. Depicting a crucified Christ surrounded by the *arma Christi*, or the instruments of his torture, this woodcut draws on familiar affective images used throughout the latter Middle Ages. Below these images on the right is a kneeling figure in a long plain robe, presumably representing

\(^{29}\) For an excellent discussion on the development of textual apparati, see M. Parkes 114-41.

\(^{30}\) In the *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, More recommends the *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, the *Imitatio Christi*, as well as Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* in order to “norysshe and encrease deuocyon” (*CW* 8: 37).

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Pico, gazing sorrowfully up at Christ with his right hand extended out towards him.\textsuperscript{31}

Such imagery of the individual fixated on the cross functions as an iconic representation of introspective mediation and picks up on a motif which runs throughout each text in the

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31 See, Hodnett no. 448.
32 This notion of the reforming powers of meditation on the Passion is heightened in More’s translation of Gianfrancesco’s biography. More’s translation has Pico state that “[i]f we hadd euer more beore our ye paynfull deth of Crist which he suffred for the loue of vs: & than if we wolde agayne think vppon oure deth we sholde wele beware of synne” (69). However, Gianfrancesco’s original describes how Pico states that such thoughts would help us to avoid “vices” [vitiis] (329; for Latin, see 328) before going on to describe how Pico was especially inclined to “to love those who had some scholarly proficiency” (329) — a detail which More omits from his translation. The Latin text of Gianfrancesco’s \textit{Vita Ioannis Pici
first letter to Gianfrancesco encouraging him to persevere in his holy way of living
despite criticisms from his peers, he concludes by admonishing him recall the Passion
(CW 1: 84). As well, just as this image reorients the eye from the kneeling figure to
Christ, this movement seems to correspond to More’s reorientation of the text toward
Pico’s own imitatio Christi. Here, this tableau, common in medieval affective piety, is
pressed into the service of a meditative text on a secular life as de Worde markets his
edition to lay readers eager for devotional works.33 What de Worde’s woodcut so
accurately captures, however, is just how radically More re-orientates Gianfrancesco’s
text: no longer just a Latinate humanist vita, the Life of Pico is restructured to fit the
expectations of late-medieval contemplative literature.

More’s efforts to refashion the Life into a work to which one might apply
meditative reading is not restricted to the structural alterations of his original: numerous
additions and deletions from his Latin source not only align the work more closely to the
devotional sensibilities of the cloister but also promote a doctrinally conservative
biographical portrait. The removal of material concerning Pico’s interest in speculative
philosophy, cabala, scholastic disputations well as any account of his admiration for
Ferrera and Florence—approximately one quarter of Gianfrancesco’s text—downplays,
as critics have been quick to note, Pico’s status as a nonconformist or minimizes his
association with the opulent world of fourteenth-century Tuscany.34 Yet, despite this

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Mirandulae, which is accompanied by Clarence H. Miller’s translation, is taken from Appendix A in
volume 1 of the Yale Complete Works.

33 For a discussion of de Worde’s exploitation of this market, see A. S. G. Edwards and Carol Meale, “The
Marketing of Printed Books in Late Medieval England.”

34 Stanford E. Lehmberg’s discussion of how these alterations reshape Pico is the most thorough of the early
discussions on this topic. Quoting A. W. Reed’s introduction to More’s English Works, Lehmberg claims
that the sum of these alterations effects a “change in Pico from extremely daring humanism to Christian
humility, charity and discipline” (74): Lehmberg goes on to say that the Life of Pico may even have
provided him with a “justification” for his decision to leave the charterhouse (74). More recently, A. S. G.
scholarly consensus that More’s alterations to the structure and material of Gianfrancesco’s Vita transform it from a humanist biography into something resembling a devotional hagiography, little attention has been paid to how More reconfigures monastic devotional practices, particularly those centred on withdrawal and reading, in order to set clearly defined limits on lay reading as well as to contain lay spiritual ambition within traditional models that uphold clerical authority.

In order to transform the Life of Pico into a strongly orthodox guide for pious living More selectively foregrounds material from Gianfrancesco’s biography that sets off Pico’s quasi-religious life. Such details include his commitment to and elevation of biblical and patristic literature (the principal reading material within the cloister), a dedication to a routine reminiscent of the monastic horarium, frequent mortification of the flesh and contemplation of the divine. While each of these practices seeks to promote the individual’s ethical formation and spiritual edification, admonishing such forms of piety focus attention on the devout reader’s own interior spiritual wellness and away from contemporary criticisms of zealous reformers that threatened to undermine ecclesiastical authority. To be sure, such concerns seemed even more pressing at this

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35 Pico’s dedication to sacred literature is clearly set out in the lengthy segment entitled “Of his study and diligence in holy scripture” (CW 1: 60-62) and later on when More describes how “set he little by any other bokes saue onli the bible / in the only studi of which: he had appointed him self tospende the residewe of his life” (CW 1: 66). More describes Pico’s dedication to an adapted form of the monastic horarium when he notes how “[e]very day at certaine howris he gaue hem self to praier” (CW 1: 64). More emphasizes Pico’s willingness to mortify his flesh on a routine basis by setting off a short segment entitled “Of ye voluntari affliction & paining of his own body” (CW 1: 64-65). Finally, Pico’s resolve to spend large amounts of time in contemplation of the divine is described when More notes how Pico “euermore on high cleued fast in contemplation” (CW 1: 68).

36 For an excellent discussion of contemporary criticisms against English monasticism as well as the changing attitudes of the laity towards monasticism from the late Middle Ages up to the Reformation, see Benjamin Thompson, “Monasteries, Society and Reform in Late Medieval England.”
point as Tudor England witnessed a resurgence of Lollardy. Although it is extremely
difficult to draw concrete conclusions about the rising popularity of religious dissention,
surviving records indicate that between 1485 and 1536 there was a marked increase in the
number of people burned for heresy in England.\(^{37}\) By channelling laypeople’s spiritual
energies back onto the individual and away from broader theological issues that could
potentially lead them away from orthodox doctrine, More’s compendium may have
sought in part to divert its reader from such religious dissention. Indeed, More’s
eagerness to direct lay piety towards recognizable forms of conduct that reinforce the
ecclesiastical status quo is especially evident in his text’s approach to the young earl of
Mirandola’s reading habits as well as his attitudes towards private retreat.

In the section of his \textit{Life} entitled “Of his study and diligence in holy scripture,”
More depicts an individual whose reading habits differ significantly from those of
Gianfrancesco’s Pico. As in the \textit{Vita Ioannis Pici Mirandulae}, More’s narrative tells how,
after burning the vernacular “trifles” written in his youth, Pico “gaue hem selfe day &
night most feruently to the studies of scripture” (\textit{CW} 1: 60). In addition to dedicating
himself to an intense programme of biblical reading, we learn that he applied an equal
zeal to enriching his knowledge “[o]f ye olde fathirs of ye chirch” (\textit{CW} 1: 60). More’s
description of Pico’s reading in this segment radically alters the description we are given
in Gianfrancesco’s \textit{Vita} by narrowing the scope as well as the aims of Pico’s reading. In
the Vita, Gianfrancesco as well tells how Pico set upon a programme of biblical studies
after turning his back on his Italian verses, but he makes clear that his protagonist’s
exegetical and theological writing led to other equally ambitious works that would

\(^{37}\) Richard Rex notes, however, that this spike in the number of religious dissenters may also be owing to
the Tudors policy of “zero tolerance” towards heresy (113).
“revitalize philosophical studies,” such as his unfinished reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle. Gianfrancesco further embellishes his classical literary ambitions in a lengthy lament on future works destined to remain unfinished by Pico on a range of Greek, medieval and Arab philosophers (see 311). Omitting to translate any of this lengthy segment, More draws attention instead to the more devotional manner of his protagonist’s reading. Reminiscent of the full intellectual commitment of cloistered reading counselled, for example, by St. Bernard to Abbot Whethamstede, More’s Pico dedicates himself “ferently” with “ardent laboure” (CW 1: 60) to biblical texts in order to assimilate and memorize them. The next detail we are told about his reading choices refer to his decision to supplement this knowledge with the writings of “ye olde fathirs of ye chirch” — the standard monastic sources relied upon to supply glosses to the Bible and to serve as additional monastic lectio. More’s Pico reads solely for his interior, moral edification, and he tells us this exactly when he relates that he devoted himself continually to “thenserchinge of ye treuth” (CW 1: 62), which, in the context of this passage, is clearly glossed as a theology and biblical exegesis that is fundamentally orthodox.

While it is true that all these details are present in his source, More draws attention to Pico’s pious reading habits by clearing away large portions of material surrounding this brief segment in his Life. Equivalent to approximately one quarter of Gianfrancesco’s Vita, the Latin text is careful not only to note Pico’s involvement with the public but also to detail his humanist credentials. In addition to repeatedly confirming

38 CW 1. 311. “Multa alia opera fuerat exorsus quibus sperai poterat futurum, ut philosophiae studia...” (CW 1. 310).
39 The importance of the writings and the lives of the Fathers to monastic reading is enshrined early in the history of Western Monasticism in the Rule of St. Benedict, which advises the monk to apply himself to these texts in order to progress further along his journey towards spiritual perfection (RB 73. 297).
Pico’s orthodoxy, More’s text is eager to illustrate that accumulating such knowledge is best used for the individual’s own private, spiritual edification. Publicly employing such biblical and theological knowledge is always discouraged. We know that More took pains to direct his reader away from entertaining such thoughts when, while describing Pico’s ability to understand “newer diuines” (*CW* 1: 60), such as Thomas Aquinas, he omits entirely Gianfrancesco’s comment that “if someone asked [Pico] to explicate extemporaneously an abstruse, unqualified question posed by one of them, he laid it bare for them.”40 More’s translation entirely alters the meaning of the passage. Whereas Gianfrancesco’s Pico publicly discusses theological queries posed by anyone, an action which in England remained prohibited since the 1409 Constitutions,41 More’s Pico is able to understand the contents of texts privately read “as though he had al theyr warkys euer byfore hys yen” (*CW* 1: 60-1). This difference may also illustrate a crucial divergence between Italian and English humanism. Aimed at preparing the individual for a career in public life, Italian humanism is forensic and aims to produce and individual highly adept at swaying the opinion of a receptive public. Pico’s eagerness to explain difficult scriptural queries furthers this pedagogical mission. English humanism is much more ambivalent about public service and is more closely embodied by the figure of the intellectual as disinterested and unattached, while recognizing that the intellectual has responsibilities to the community.42 More’s redirection of Pico’s intellectual energies inward rather than outward is complemented by his further omission of pages of

41 On the broad impact of the Constitutions prohibitions against preaching, see Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change.”
42 For a recent discussion on English humanism, see Wakelin 6-9. For a discussion of the more civic-minded orientation of Italian humanism, Kristeller, “Humanism” 113-37.
information about the Italian’s secular literary and philological endeavours that contribute to his representation in the *Vita* as civic-minded humanist skilled in the arts of oratory and statecraft.

Unlike the inward-looking contemplative More takes great pains to portray, Gianfrancesco’s Pico directs his energies outward for the edification of others. Immediately after we are told how ardently he embraces his biblical studies, we learn, in the same sentence, that Pico offered his *Heptaplus*, an exegetical tract on the first seven days of creation “as his first fruits” to an eager public. More’s omission of Pico’s treatise, which publicly lays open “the deepest mysteries of our Christian theology” is a deliberate excision that suggests a great deal about his notions of lay piety. By removing such passages that emphasise Pico’s public career, More re-imagines Pico in a traditionally orthodox manner that is sensitive to England’s current religious climate. The alterations More makes to his subject seem to reflect both contemporary trends in lay piety that seek to adapt the rituals of monastic life onto a secular context as well as the concerns on the part of ecclesiastical authorities to define the forms in which spiritually ambitious sixteenth-century laypeople expressed their devotion and read sacred texts.

More’s deliberate alterations to Pico’s reading habits are further evident in his removal of Gianfrancesco’s numerous references to Pico’s humanist credentials. As a good exemplar of humanist reading, Pico is carefully described in the *Vita* as delighted in the “true wisdom” and “true eloquence” contained in biblical literature. Immediately following his description of the young Italian’s earlier encounters with scripture,

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43 *CW* 1: 305. “... statim... ceu frugum primitias... de operibus sex dierum Geneseos & die quitis heptaplum obtulit” (*CW* 1: 304).
44 *CW* 1: 305. “profundissimis nostrae christianae theologiae mysteriis” (*CW* 1: 304)
Gianfrancesco relates how Pico, placing his reception of biblical texts firmly within a humanist register, bestowed “many encomia... on the New Testament, [and] said that Paul’s epistles surpass the writings of all orators in eloquence... even of Cicero and Demosthenes.” Here, More not only eliminates one of many references to Pico’s predilection for combining sacred and secular literature but also removes references to Pico’s approach to these texts, which was shaped by humanist concern with rhetoric. Whereas Gianfrancesco dwells on the fact that it was the eloquence of these texts that first opened the door to his further exploration of sacred writing, More recommences his translation after Pico “bode... farwell” (CW 1: 61) to public disputes over biblical or theological questions and thus completely redirects the Italian’s approach to scriptural reading in order to assimilate it to the devotional sensibilities he is attempting to promote.

The importance that More’s biography of Pico places on studious or contemplative withdrawal from the world resurfaces again in his translations of Pico’s letters to his nephew Gianfrancesco and friend Andrea Corneo. While the inclusion of these letters has led scholars to question the coherency of the Life of Pico, this material...

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46 CW 1: 305. “... testamenti novi allata preconia, Pauli epistolae oratorum omnium scripitionibus eloquentia praestare dicebat, Tullii etiam ipsius Demosthenisque” (CW 1: 304).

47 In a lengthy passage excised by More, Gianfrancesco goes on to relate a number of Pico’s intellectual endeavours, including his attempts to harmonize the philosophical teachings of Plato and Aristotle, his remarkable philological skill in clearing up ambiguities in scripture, his work to refute enemies of the church, and finally his immense rhetorical skill, which at various points is compared with a host of authors and orators from antiquity (CW 1: 307-15). Thus, although insisting that Pico used his mastery of classical literature in the service of Catholicism, Gianfrancesco carefully situates this passage within the broader context of a discussion of Pico’s superlative eloquence, that essential quality of the humanist.

48 For example, Gianfrancesco suggests the primary role eloquence plays in attracting Pico to sacred texts when he writes that, according to the earl of Miranda, Paul’s writings established him as “the prince of orators” because his writings “breathe and savour of true and sound eloquence, based with true art on true substance, and (to put it briefly) are unselfconsciously crammed with the riches of the Egyptians” (CW 1: 305).

49 Along with his translation of Gianfrancesco’s biography, in his compendium More includes translations of three letters, Pico’s commentary on Psalm 15, and two sets of twelve counsels for leading a good life and for being a good lover of God. Curiously, critics have paid little attention to the remaining contents of the volume and have not considered the anthology as a unified whole. Edwards labels the collection “a unique form of devotional compendium” (CW 1: lv), but disparages the integrity of More’s collection, which
makes an important contribution to the unity of the work as a spiritual guide. Known as “vocation letters,” such letters offering direction for cultivating one’s spiritual life were popular in monastic circles throughout the Middle Ages. What is surprising, however, is that the advice Pico gives in each of these letters departs from traditional attitudes of humanists towards the public service. This seems especially unusual given that More entered public service in the same year Rastell first published the Life of Pico. However, if we keep in mind that More is crafting a spiritual guide which aims to uphold traditional forms of devotion that are rooted in monastic models, such views towards public life seem less unexpected. Departing from the dominant strain of civic humanism, which stressed an obligation to an active engagement in public affairs (negotium), Pico’s letters—among other things—stress and maintain the value of withdrawal (otium) from its corrupting influences.

While present in the biography, the spiritual benefits of retreating into oneself for periods of contemplative repose are made explicit in his letter to Gianfrancesco. Instead of striving after the distinctions and honours offered by aristocratic society, Pico directs his nephew to withdraw “in ye secret chambre of the mynde / in the preuy closet of the sowle” in order to communicate with God in the “lightsome darkenes of contemplation” work” (CW 1: lv). Germain Marc’hadour’s description of these texts—“from first page to last”—as a “spiritual nosegay” (“Thomas More’s Spirituality” 130) is more accurate since it acknowledges the unity of the work achieved through its diverse components. Each of the texts which More translates fit together into a coherent whole if one views them as a careful selection of texts rooted in literary traditions which, although not the exclusive preserve of the monastery, enjoyed a great deal of popularity within the cloister. Among the most popular genres among monastic readers were those which concentrate, as Jean Leclercq notes, on “actual happenings and experiences rather than... ideas” and are “pastoral in nature,” such as hagiography, epistolography, and commentaries on the psalms (Love of Learning, 153) —all of which are included in the Life of Pico.

50 Such letters may be found in the correspondences of Peter the Venerable, Bernard of Clairvaux, Adam of Perseigne and a host of other monks whose positions necessitated that they take on the role of spiritual advisors. On the topic of vocation letters, see Leclercq, Love of Learning, 180.

51 On this element of civic humanism, see Kristeller, “Humanism” 131-133. On the atypicality of favouring otium over negotium, see Skinner 1: 218.
(CW 1: 83). Anticipating the individual, private encounter with scripture that would soon be advocated by Protestants, More’s use of imagery that depicts the mind as a building—even a highly subdivided one—is venerable in medieval culture. However, the emphasis placed on privacy and secrecy is not, and may respond to an increasing desire on the part of the laity to nurture a personal and confidential relationship with God, away from immediate clerical supervision. More evidently shared Pico’s attitudes on the necessity for periodic seclusion from others and often withdrew from society to his New Building in order to engage in such spiritual exercises. Moreover, deploying the monastic language of retreat, Pico adds that Gianfrancesco should “cease not day nor night” in reading the Bible since such devotion possesses a “meuelous powar [that] transformeth & chaungith ye redars mynde in to the loue of god” (CW 1: 84). This passage, which describes a practice close the monastic tradition of otium, is also suggestive of the meditative reading performed in the cloister that had drawn increasing interest from an English laity. The unceasing meditation on biblical material which gradually engenders individual transformation and brings one closer to God through contemplation is reminiscent of monastic lectio, and there can be little doubt that More’s readers would have recognized this as such. Thus, More’s inclusion of this letter first among the others serves as a model for his English readers upon which they can pattern their own adaptation of this monastic custom. Yet, this passage also typifies More’s transposition of these customs to main ambitions.

As in the Life, Pico’s first letter to his nephew contrasts the ideal of withdrawal against personal, public ambition which, in this case, takes the form of involvement in

52 On More’s frequent retreats to the New Building, see Roper 25-26.
civic affairs. More’s vision of lay piety seeks to confine his readers’ attention to their own ethical reformation that is firmly entrenched in a Catholic devotional culture. Concern about larger issues is discouraged by the deep strain of *contemptus mundi* which runs throughout each of the correspondences. More’s letters to Andrea Corneo as well as his second letter to Gianfrancesco both contrast the ideal of salutary withdrawal against the corrupting influence of pursuing civic aspirations. To be sure, in More’s prologue to Pico’s letter to Corneo, he draws attention to his refusal to enter “the ciuile and activie life” (*CW* 1: 85) by asserting that study ought only to be applied to the “instruction of [one’s] mynde in morall vertue” (*CW* 1: 85). Such advice may seem redundant if we believe that More intended this work primarily as a New Years gift for the newly consecrated Poor Claire, Joyce Lee, who could not have acted on any ambition to enter public life even if she could harbour such aspirations. Yet, More’s deletions to Pico’s original letter suggest that this translation was also targeted at elite secular readers. In the translated version, the letter ends with Pico asserting that he continues to apply himself to study through the acquisition of languages in order to further enhance his reading of biblical texts and that such endeavours are what truly “apertaine to a noble prince” (*CW* 1: 88). As a result, this letter concludes by reinscribing More’s idealized pious representation of Pico as a solitary, studious and contemplative layman for his readers to emulate. In order to maintain this image of Pico, however, he excises the remainder of the letter which, among other things, alludes to Pico’s own “amorous...

53 Edith Willow succinctly comments that each of Pico’s letters discuss “the specious pleasures of this life, the wretchedness of the court… evil company, and the brevity of this life” (220).

54 Within the letter, Pico vividly contrasts this two states of interior reflection and worldly ambition when he states: “[I] set more bi my little house / my study / the pleasure of my bokes / ye rest and peace of my mynde: then by all your kingis palacis / all your commune besines / all your glory / all the aduauntage that ye hawke aftir / and all the fauoure of the court” (*CW* 1: 87). Pico’s choice of imagery again demonstrates the gradual movement towards interior withdrawal as he moves from his house, to his study, to his books, before finally arriving at an enclosed space within his imagination.
escapades,” thus removing any references to Pico’s sexuality since they disrupt the text’s agenda to promote the Italian as an exemplar of a particular type of austere lay piety.

These letters no doubt had a deeply personal resonance with More who, shortly after departing from the Carthusians, embarked on a public career. According to Stapleton, More had a strong distaste for the court and “judged himself to be quite unfitted to that mode of life and, in fact, loathed the life of the Court.” That More shared Pico’s reticence about public office—an unusual attitude to be held by a humanist—is confirmed in a letter by Erasmus, who, writing to Ulrich von Hutton, describes More’s distaste for the court as well as the great difficulty Henry’s regime had in luring him into royal service. Such sentiments may be attributable to hagiographical embellishment; More’s avowed reluctance to enter politics has been justifiably questioned by critics, especially given his quick rise to prominence in the Inns of Court, as well as in the political world of London.

If More was so committed to public life, why then is he so concerned with withdrawal? More’s promotion of detachment from the world in the vernacular Life of

55 The editors of the Yale Edition note that in the remainder of the letter Pico “discusses his plans to visit Rome, Corneo’s marital affairs, Pico’s Italian verses, a wayward servant of Pico, and mitigates the amorous escapades of an unnamed lover, evidently Pico himself, who had abducted Margherita, the wife of Giuliano Mariotto dei Medici” (CW 1: 236).
56 Stapleton, Life and Illustrious Martyrdom 71. The Latin reads: “Vide tamen ut huic se vitae generi ineptissimum existimaverit, ut ab aulica vita ... totus abhorruerit” (29).
57 Although perhaps more political than pious, More’s reasons for remaining out of public service are succinctly stated by Erasmus in his letter to Ulrich von Hutton. There, Erasmus notes that More “was formerly rather disinclined to a Court life and to any intimacy with princes, having always a special hatred of tyranny and a great fancy for equality... [,] He could not even be tempted to Henry the Eighth’s Court without great trouble, although nothing could be desired more courteous or less exacting than this Prince.” See further, The Epistles of Erasmus 3: 390-91.
58 More’s progress, between 1504 to 1511, in within the legal and political world was nothing short of remarkable. At Lincoln’s Inn, he was promoted from financial accountant in 1507 to the ceremonial post of butler and then, in 1510, to marshal of the inn before finally being named reader in 1511. In 1504, More also became a member of the House of Commons, likely in the constituency of Gatton, before becoming MP for the city of London itself in 1510. This same year, More was appointed undersheriff for London.
Pico aims to reinforce an inward-looking lay piety that implicitly maintains clerical authority by conferring prestige onto monastic devotional practices that it imitates; yet, Roper’s biography indicates that More himself observed such customs throughout his life. The recurrence of the frequent practice of *otium*, accompanied by periods of meditative *lectio*, in his biographies as well as in his own writing strongly suggests that he believed such activities performed a useful individual and social function. More’s use of Pico to promote the ethically productive benefits that result from these traditional spiritual exercises is, I would argue, strategic. Given his attachment to a monastic *conversatio* in which reading figured prominently, there can be little doubt that he believed such meditative reading, which his own last works suggest he followed, was capable of delivering on the promises of a complete ethical reformation that brought one closer to God. However, in choosing a pious noble who never actually entered an order, More’s exemplar is perfectly suited to elite vernacular readers eager for new guides that provide models for a structured form of spiritual living outside the cloister. Based on information from his biography as well as his writings, More also seems to have pursued a hybridized pattern of living which attempted to integrate the discipline of the cloister with the rigours of an active public life.

Yet, More’s commitment to this model of the mixed life appears also to be based on a conviction regarding its benefit to society. I have already argued that the form of piety encouraged by More’s *Life of Pico* serves a doctrinally conservative agenda: directing one’s spiritual energies solely towards one’s own continuous, moral renovation leaves little room to ponder theological controversies. This particular model of the mixed life promotes stability within the Church since its rigid interiority ensures that boundaries
between lay person and cleric are never transgressed and that the forms and devotions of monastic life are accorded a full measure of dignity. More’s *Life of Pico* thus serves a double role of providing an ambitious laity with a paradigm of religious life lived in the world while at the same time ensuring that this ambition is contained within established, orthodox forms. Although More’s sensitivity towards the broader consequences of adhering to such a pattern of living have on ensuring stability within the social order is never explicitly addressed in his *Life of Pico*, the secularized use of *otium* in *Utopia* for ends similar to those I have already discussed suggests an awareness on More’s part of the potential for such practices to construct a more cohesive society. In the next segment of my chapter, I will discuss More’s adaptation of monastic discipline and the devotional culture to create his ideal commonwealth, and will suggest that the fundamental organizing principals of Utopian society may be seen as a secular mirror of the conventual spiritual exercises More drew upon in his *Life of Pico*.

“*Education and the Good Institutions*” of *Utopia:*

**Utopian Pedagogy and the Monastic Intellectual Tradition**

Many critics have noted similarities between the lives of the Utopians and those of the religious orders. Often, these observations are relegated to a footnote and have never received a thorough consideration. Just as Roper in his *Life* recorded More’s vital relationship to monasticism without pausing over its importance so too has the majority of scholarly criticism on his *Utopia*. This scholarly oversight is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Surtz and Hexter’s 1965 edition of *Utopia* in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*. Although the editors note that studies of this work tend to place too much
stress on the classics, they proceed to locate *Utopia*’s medieval influences in a narrow range of political literature that includes Augustine’s *City of God* as well as such *specula principum* as Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes*—despite their own concession that “More rarely borrows distinctive concepts or phrases” from these texts (*CW* 4: clxvi). Similarly, in Logan, Adams, and Miller’s 1995 bilingual edition of *Utopia*—distilling a number of claims advanced in Logan’s *The Meaning of More’s Utopia*—the text’s “shaping forces” are again located *solely* within a classical tradition that is centred on the works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Lucian (xxii-xxv). One notable exception to this pervasive indifference to More’s debts to the Middle Ages may be found, however, in Northrop Frye’s more general discussion of literary utopias. Frye argues that the influence of the monastery as a ritualized society has informed utopian thought for centuries, an influence that may be seen in a range of works from *Utopia* and Campanella’s *La Città del Sole* to St. Simon, Fourier and Comte (35). Using Frye’s initial observation as a point of departure, I will begin my discussion of *Utopia* by placing the text within a tradition of medieval travel narratives that draw on monasticism to construct idealized communities in order to demonstrate that precedents existed for More’s exploitation of monastic culture to offer alternatives to Western European polities. I will then proceed to discuss how these elements offer valuable insights into the Utopians’ conception of education, subjectivity, and society.

Constructing utopian spaces in travel writing along monastic lines is a tradition that extends deep into the Middle Ages. Yet, when critics do approach the text as a travel narrative most take their cue from More’s description of Hythloday as Vespucci’s

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59 Frye is not the only critic to look back to the Middle Ages when considering the forces which shaped More’s work. P. Albert Duhamel has gone so far as to claim that *Utopia* is “probably the most medieval of More’s works” in “Medievalism of More’s *Utopia*” 234.
“constant companion on the last three of his for voyages” (45)\textsuperscript{60} and attempt to place it within a New World context that locates \textit{Utopia} at the start of an emergent tradition of literature produced during “England’s Age of Discovery.”\textsuperscript{61} A more productive approach, which reinforces the text’s connection with monasticism, is to look backward to the Utopians’ literary ancestors, the Brahmans. Within a range of exotic travel narratives, the Brahmans, whose island in far-east India ensures their separation from other peoples, are often described as living a quasi-monastic life. Important accounts of this distinctive community are found in two well-known texts: \textit{The Travels of Sir John Mandeville} and the \textit{Alexander} romances. In both texts the Brahmans, like the Utopians, form an idealized community that functions as a mirror to comment on the shortcomings of Western European society.

Mandeville’s brief description of the Brahmans’ isolationism and monkish behaviour offers an important precedent for \textit{Utopia} and its use of religious discipline to fashion an ideal society. Similar to the monastic ideal, the Brahmans are sequestered from potential threats to their culture—which is defined by superlative virtue and an adherence to the Decalogue—by residing on an island. Indeed, it is out of a concern over contaminating this “land of feyth” (33.21) that Alexander the Great, Mandeville tells us, refuses to disrupt “hire gode pees” (33.11) and the purity of their manner of living.

Although the account given in the \textit{Travels} offers few similarities between the two

\textsuperscript{60} All quotations are taken from Logan, Adams, and Miller’s edition of \textit{Utopia}, which includes the Latin text and English translation.

\textsuperscript{61} Campbell, \textit{The Witness and the Other World} 212. Peter Herman’s “Who’s That in the Mirror?” is one of the few articles to consider the complex relationship of \textit{Utopia} to the New World by arguing that the text anticipates post-colonialist criticism. In contrast to Herman’s article, earlier scholarship has considered new world contexts as relatively unimportant to \textit{Utopia}. For example, Logan writes,“Utopia must be somewhere, so it may as well be in the extremely tropical Americas” (\textit{Meaning} 195). Hexter as well reduces the significance of the New World to More’s text by noting that “[f]here was not after all in Vespucci’s slim narrative much more than a spark for the imagination” (\textit{CW} 4: xxxii).
communities, Mandeville explicitly links the Brahmans to monasticism when he remarks that “þei ben so chast & leden so gode life as þat þei weren religious men” (33.28-9). This strategy of highlighting an association between a distant, unfamiliar people, who have never been exposed to Christian revelation, to an idealized community of devout Christians only to note that this isolated society lives in a manner that is more in tune with the ideals of Christianity has been read by critics to serve as a strong criticism of Western European society. What is important for our discussion is that Mandeville draws attention to the excellence of the Brahmans by highlighting the similarity of their way of life to monasticism.

The anonymous and roughly contemporary *Alexander and Dindimus* dilates this episode by incorporating additional information about the Brahmans that further align their community with the cloister. A short fragment of the Middle English alliterative *Alexander*, this text comprises five letters that are exchanged between Alexander the Great and Dindimus, king of the Brahmans. Likely written by a cleric, this brief excerpt was most likely used to extol the virtues of the contemplative life. Significant to my discussion, however, are the descriptions of Dindimus’s people as literary ancestors to the Utopians who incorporate elements of monastic life to create an ideal commonwealth. Describing their sober living as a “reule” (507) in which all is done for the sake of God (361), Dindimus writes that the Brahmans have “ne wilne in þis world” (289) and thus live “simpleliche” (290) as though they have “ben to penance iput” (291). In addition to

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62 Moseley, for example, develops this notion at length in the introduction to his edition of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. See Moseley 22-29.
63 While *The Travels of John Mandeville* is believed to have been composed between 1356 and 1366, Walter Skeat dates *Alexander and Dindimus* sometime between 1340 and 1370 (xx).
64 In his introduction, Skeat ascribes the poem to an ecclesiastic (xviii). As well, Skeat argues that the aim of the text is to draw contrast between paganism and Christianity as well as the active life and the contemplative life (xviii).
this encapsulation of the Brahmans life, Dindimus includes numerous details which align their life more closely with those living in religious orders. Such details include their poverty (291), avoidance of dainty foods (306), desire to flee from lust (334), desire to avoid covetousness and envy (370-3), refusal to dye cloth (402), dislike of mirth (465) as well as an extreme loathing for gold (1021-41). The strongly monastic and penitential register in which Dindimus sketches the Brahmans’ life surfaces periodically throughout the letters. For example, when describing the Brahmans’ attitudes towards warfare, he states that whereas Alexander fights against “þi fon þat faren þe biside” (341), the Brahmans direct their attention to the “enimis wiþinne vs” (343). Such focus on interiority as a tool for fashioning a cohesive and peaceful community is certainly analogous to monastic practices, and, I will argue, is used by More to achieve similar ends. Lastly, at the end of his final letter to Alexander, Dindimus describes their existence as “pilgrimus put in þis worde” (983) who above all look forward to entering “þe hous þat hie is in blysse” (984). Each of these statements re-enforces the similarity of the Brahmans’ attitudes towards society as well as subjectivity to those of the religious orders. Indeed, in both accounts the individuality of the Brahmans is always subordinated to the ascetic ideals of the community. The secularized model of (idealized) monasticism’s social egalitarianism both texts exhibit as well as the focus on the continuous interior progress towards God which Dindimus describes clearly demonstrate that precedents existed within medieval travel writing for exploiting monastic discipline to create an ideal commonwealth that offered implicit critiques and alternatives to Western European society.
In addition to the classical models of Plato and Aristotle that More drew upon to create his ideal commonwealth, *Utopia* thus follows in the footsteps of other medieval travel narratives by transposing monastic disciplinary structures onto a secular context. Past scholarship has been quick to note that along with the stability of More’s society comes a wide-ranging set of restrictions imposed on the individual.\(^6^5\) And since many of the prohibitions on Utopians’ personal freedom seem distasteful to modern sensibilities, critics have also been quick to condemn the “drab uniformity” of the Utopians’ lives.\(^6^6\) Yet, I would argue that More’s playful best commonwealth exercise is not intended to inspire our indignation over the rigidity of Utopian practices, especially since More subjected himself to a similarly severe programme of spiritual as well as penitential exercises after his residence with the Carthusians in London. Instead, I would argue that most of the proscriptions on Utopian freedoms are the outcome of a polity whose institutional arrangements are based largely on monastic discipline. In addition to arguing that this association exists on a more significant level than has hitherto been considered, I will also argue that the monastic notion of *otium* plays a crucial role within the Utopians’ programme of formation which ensures the stability of the state and the virtuous behaviour of its citizens. The place of education in creating an ideal commonwealth is fundamental, and, while critics have tended to highlight the resemblances of Utopian education to the ideas propounded by Erasmus and Vives\(^6^7\) or by the best commonwealth

\(^6^5\) Logan catalogues many of the restrictions placed on Utopian freedoms in *Meaning* 200-208. More recently, Hanan Yoran discusses some of the negative corollaries of Utopian policy in “More’s *Utopia* and Erasmus’ No-place” (7-10).

\(^6^6\) Logan’s appraisal of Utopian life is often echoed in current scholarship on *Utopia* (*Meaning* 221, see also 230, 237-38).

\(^6^7\) See, for example, Pearl Hogrefe, *The Sir Thomas More Circle* 164-66.
theorists of antiquity. More draws substantially on monastic practice to further the intellectual discipline and development of the Utopians. Indeed, apart from the many correspondences in the organization of Utopia and the cloister, the strongest link between these two communities lies in their attitudes toward work and scholarship—the two actions which also delineate the (ideal) monastic vocation. Thus, my discussion will demonstrate that in *Utopia* More, as he did in the *Life of Pico*, borrows heavily from monastic culture in order to furnish the individual with a strictly controlled programme of formation that reinforces ethical behaviour and promotes a socially conservative set of attitudes that upholds the current political and ecclesiastical hierarchy.

From the outset of the text, More obliquely invites the careful reader to draw parallels between Utopia and the monastery by tacitly mirroring details of Hythloday’s experiences with the Utopians and his own history among the Carthusians. About his life with the Utopians, Hythloday recalls, “I lived there more than five years, and would never have left, if it had not been to make that new world known to others” (105). Like his fictional interlocutor, More spent a similar amount of time—a little over four years—with the Carthusians at the London Charterhouse, participating in their daily spiritual exercises before leaving this religious life of withdrawal for a career in the law. As well, whereas Hythloday forsakes this ideal commonwealth in order to “make that new world known to others,” More too commits himself to serving the public good—first as Member of Parliament, then as Under-Sheriff, both for the city of London, and, eventually, as the king’s personal counsellor. Such invitations to look for connections

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68 George Logan provides a thorough comparison between education in the imagined republics of Plato and Aristotle and More’s *Utopia*. See especially *Meaning* 198-204. However, what is unique to *Utopia*, as Logan has noted, is that it offers an actual model of a functional society rather than a series of conclusions worked out from various logical arguments (*Meaning* 130).
between More’s own experience and his fictional world seem more plausible since he himself drew such playful associations. Indeed, this link between More’s experience with religious life and Utopia is most evident in a letter to Erasmus in which he imagines himself as king of Utopia, “crowned with a diadem of wheat... in my Franciscan frock” (*Selected Letters* 81).

Many scholars have identified parallels between the social arrangements of the Utopians and the monastic orders; yet, when commented on, these associations often only garner a very brief remark. Logan, Adams, and Miller’s edition is the most thorough in noting customs that the Utopians share with monastic communities. Among these, they observe the practice of communal eating (141) begun with a moral reading (143); the periodic exchange of dwellings (125); uniformity of dress, which, they point out, closely resembles the Carthusians’ habit (133); and, finally, their devotion to the dignity of labour (111). These shared customs are not, however, the only ways in which Utopian society reflects monastic practices. For instance, the Utopians share a monkish predilection for historiography. Hythloday tells us that since Utopus’s conquest of the island, their records “were diligently compiled and... carefully preserved in writing” (121). While the translation renders their mode of historical writing as “records” in English, the Latin text reads *annales* rather than the more neutral *historia*.69 This choice is highly suggestive since the annal is a form of historiography with clear monastic associations and would be equally evocative of the cloister as it would of Tacitus.

In addition to their shared fondness for historiography, monastic and Utopian communities regulate travel in an equally rigorous manner. The restrictions placed on

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69 Yoran makes a similar observation about More’s choice of words but argues that this distinction is more indicative of the states historical stasis and lack of “any development or change” (17) in Utopian society.
Utopian travel specify that individuals must obtain permission from the syphogrants and tranibors, as well as travel together in groups with a letter “granting leave to travel and fixing a day to return” (145). These stipulations are all closely related to the limitations that Benedict’s Rule as well as the Carthusian Statutes place on monks journeying outside the monastery. In order for monks to leave the monastery, permission must be obtained from the abbot, and it is he alone who decides the duration of their travels (see RB 67. 289). Moreover, just as the Utopians must perform their usual work in whatever township they travel to (145), so too are the monks instructed to perform “the Work of God” wherever they happen to be (RB 50. 253-54).

The arrangement of Utopia’s governing institutions is also highly reminiscent of the structure of authority within the monastery. That Utopian society is governed like a religious order may be seen in its lack of a central executive authority. Although the syphogrants from each city elect a governor, there is no governor over the whole island. In Benedictine monasticism, for example, the abbot, once elected by his peers, enjoys a similar autonomy over his community as his power over those beneath him is absolute. Broader concerns of the order are voiced at the General Chapter which, in the case of Benedictine and Carthusian monasticism, met on a triennial and annual basis respectively. This Carthusian practice appears to be mirrored in Utopia with the annual gathering at Amaurot of representatives from each city to “consider affairs of common

70 All quotations from the Rule of Saint Benedict are keyed to the chapter number of the bilingual Latin / English edition translated and edited by Timothy Fry et al.
71 Following Pope Benedict XII’s 1336 bull Summi magistri, a single triennial provincial chapter replaced the two of North and South; in each monastery, however, an annual chapter was held at which the superior was expected to deliver a full financial account. For a useful discussion on the changes in Benedictine monasticism ushered in by Benedict’s promulgation, see David Knowles, The Religious Orders in England 2: 3-13, esp. 4. E. Margaret Thompson discusses the annual Carthusian General Chapter at the Grand Chartreuse as a means of providing maintenance of customs and statutes in The Carthusian Order in England 249-62.
interest” (113). Such correspondences further invite us to look for connections between Utopia’s thoroughly disciplined society and the rigour of monastic life.

More substantial and compelling links between these communities may be found in their similar attitudes towards pedagogy. In comparing Utopia with the commonwealths of contemporary Europe, Hythloday repeatedly locates the origin of their differences not just in contradictory attitudes towards private property but also in their varying approaches to education. In describing the dissolute manner in which European governments administer justice, Hythloday compares the state to “bad schoolmasters” and the citizens to “pupils” (57), thus couching his discourse of concern for the state within a pedagogical register. Hythloday later reinforces this relationship between correct governance of the state and proper pedagogy when he locates the source responsible for “driving men into thievery” (63) in the citizens’ lack of an appropriate education. Hythloday opines that, instead of retaining vast multitudes of “idle” men to serve in standing armies, the state would benefit far more if these men were “taught practical crafts to earn their living and trained to manly labour” (61). While the stress that Raphael places on the importance of education to the state as well as the value of practical skills do have analogues in the writings of Plato and Aristotle,72 the Utopians’ systematic approach to individual development also resembles the strategies used to engineer the ethical formation of religious by Christian monks. Antique tradition and medieval monastic practices need not be antithetical.

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72 Logan makes the most convincing case for locating the Utopians’ attitudes towards education in the works of Plato and Aristotle in *The Meaning of More’s Utopia*. He begins by noting that both of these theorists devote more space to education than to any other topic in their best-commonwealth exercises (198-201), before noting its importance to both as a means to ensuring social harmony (198-9; see also Plato’s *Republic* IV 424 D-E and Aristotle’s *Politics* II. 1263b). More specifically, Logan cites the Utopians’ equal concern for their children’s morals and education, compulsory military training, participation in games and instruction in agriculture as evidence to support his claim (200).
Raphael is critical of the educational programmes currently in place within the aristocratic household and the university, which are responsible for reproducing society’s two governing estates, and he outlines a Utopian pedagogy, which, unlike its European counterparts, occupies a central position in the life of each Utopian and, moreover, is intimately tied to religion. Part of the difference between the Utopians and their European counterparts is that, for the former, education, like the regular life of a monk, embraces every aspect of their existence and persists for the whole of the individual’s life. This stress on lifelong learning has a clear analogue in the monastery, which Benedict himself referred to as a “school for the Lord’s service” (RB Prol. 165). This conception of education corresponds more to a type of thorough formation conveyed by the Latin *educatio*, whose English cognate referred originally to the process by which a young person was “brought up,” with reference to his or her social station as well as to the kind of manners and habits acquired. In *Utopia*, More unites this older notion of education as upbringing with our notion of education as instruction when outlining Utopian pedagogy. Contrasting the Utopians’ attitude towards wealth with that of the Europeans, Hythloday notes that the reason for such difference stems “partly from their upbringing [*partim ex educatione*]... and partly from instruction and good books [*partim ex doctrina et literis*]” (155). What brings these two elements together in the world of Utopia is religion, for the clergy is solely entrusted with the education, in both the formative and instructional senses of the word, of Utopia’s youth. Analogous to claustral attitudes...

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73 In his edition of the *Rule*, Fry explains comments on his use of the proposition “for” rather than “of” when translating “dominici schola servitii” by noting that a “school ‘for’ rather than ‘of’ seems best to catch the idea that the monastery is a place where the monks both learn how to serve the Lord and actually do so” (see further note for Prol. 45).
74 See *OED* entry 2: “The process of ‘bringing up’ (young persons); the manner in which a person has been ‘brought up’; with reference to social station, kind of manners and habits acquired, calling or employment prepared for, etc.”
towards *lectio divina*, which privileges ethical melioration as the goal of reading, the Utopians’ concern, Hythloday tellingly declares, “for bookish knowledge [*literarum cura*] is considered no more important than concern for morality and virtue” (231). This fusion of instruction with moral formation, which begins when the priests of the commonwealth initiate the educational progress of Utopian youths, is one of the ways in which More uses religion within his wider and unremitting programme of individual formation.

A careful look at the daily routine of the Utopians reveals the extent to which More drew from this unique pattern of life and its consequent endeavour to direct the individual’s ethical formation. Governing the lives of the Utopians is a carefully regulated programme that blends physical labour with intellectual pursuit; such a regimen gives shape to their way of life by prescribing particular duties to be fulfilled at specific times. While cataloguing the different occupations the Utopians engage in, Hythloday describes the division of their day in some detail: “They work three hours before noon, when they go to lunch. After lunch, they rest for two hours, then go to work for another three hours. Then they have supper, and at about eight o’clock... they go to bed, and sleep eight hours” (127). What is important about this description, and what has gone all but unnoticed by scholars, is just how closely the Utopian day parallels the monastic day. Like the Utopians, who rise before dawn to attend public lectures (127), monks rise between 4 and 5 am (depending on the time of year) for Matins, the first of the day-hours, which is followed shortly after by Prime (6 am). Afterward, the brothers would engage in a period of reading or meditation followed by approximately two hours of work before noon. Similarly, the three hours following Nones, which fell between 1:30 and 2:30 pm,
is devoted to rest and is then followed by a period of manual labour until supper. And, once again, like the Utopian day, the end of the monastic day comes at approximately 8 pm. In other words, the work cycles of both the Utopian and the monk are such that the day is divided between manual labour and more intellectual pursuits. That said, More’s commitment to education is likely responsible for one significant divergence from this monastic model: departing slightly from the disciplinary structure of the cloister, More has the Utopians attend public lectures rather than observe repetitive ceremonies similar to the canonical hours. Nevertheless, a more specific glance at monastic life as well as at the adaptations made to the *horarium* in the late Middle Ages reinforces similarity rather than difference. Although the shape of the monastic day in the sixteenth century remained essentially the same as it had been in the twelfth, new developments in claustral life demanded more of the brothers’ time: these changes required the monks to spend more hours performing specialized jobs and less time performing their spiritual exercises.

Owing to the decentralization of domestic management of the monastery, exceptional monks were trained to occupy a range of administrative offices. This constituted part of their *opus manuum*. For those brothers who did not occupy an administrative post, traditional tasks, such as those involved with book production, were also quite common. Besides this traditionally monastic activity, the brothers specialized in various minor crafts, such as embroidery, carving and painting. Some advanced quite far in medical learning and even practiced surgery on their brethren, despite repeated...

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75 Mapping the monastic *horarium* onto a modern day divided by twenty-four hours is nearly impossible, especially given the fact that this day differed from season to season in order to accommodate the difference in daylight hours. David Knowles includes a useful diagram of the monastic day (based on the *Regularis Concordia*) in both the winter and summer that is keyed to a twenty-four hour clock in *The Monastic Order in England*, 714-15.

76 My discussion of the changes in the monastic day and the rise of obedientiaries as well as more specialized trades among the brothers is entirely indebted to David Knowles’s excellent discussion of monastic employment and changes in the *horarium* in *The Religious Orders in England*, 2: 229-39.
prohibitions against medical practice. Mathematics also became a subject of interest to brothers as well as related fields of learning such as astronomy. Although direct monastic involvement in agriculture becomes less common near the end of the Middle Ages—except for the Carthusians, who were given an individual garden to cultivate as part of their manual labour—it was not unheard of for monks to engage in heavy manual labour, such as harvesting and construction. However, when a monk proved unable to perform such professional tasks or more manual labours, the basic activity of reading and study was always available to him. The expansion of specialized skills within the monastery, which would have been familiar to More, further reveals similarities between the cloister and Utopia, where each citizen is encouraged to learn a craft as well as participate in agricultural activity. When not occupied by community duties or liturgical offices, the monk was expected to dedicate himself to lectio—which could be practiced for an hour in the early morning, approximately three hours between chapter and Sext,77 and about another two hours later in the afternoon.78 This practice is also mirrored in the customs of the Utopians. Indeed, after Hythloday delineates the Utopian workday, he goes on to note that “when they are not working, eating or sleeping... [they devote themselves] to intellectual activity” (127). For both communities, such a regulated pattern of life not only fosters strong communal bonds but also, and equally importantly, serves as a tool to ensure the careful formation of its members.

Having noted the contribution that the well-ordered lives of the Utopians makes to their individual formation, I will also consider their notion of what constitutes a good life.

77 Depending on the time of the year, chapter was held either just after Terce and the Morrow Mass, as in the winter, or immediately after Prime and the Morrow Mass, as in the summer.
78 On the different times available for lectio in the horarium, see Knowles, The Monastic Order in England, 451.
Like their monastic counterparts in Europe, the Utopians use manual labour both to guard against physical and mental idleness and to generate devout, studious and industrious individuals. Among Hythloday’s first remarks about the Utopians is his amazement at their “diligence and zeal to learn” (105). Not long after this comment, he locates the origin of this readiness to acquire knowledge in their “being better governed and living more happily than we do” (107). Fundamental to Utopian theology is the principle that “the soul is immortal and by God’s beneficence born for happiness” (161), and, in discussing this happiness, Hythloday reports that the Utopians find it “only in good and honest pleasure” (163). Although critics have been keen to situate the core of Utopian moral philosophy—that pleasure is the goal of life and that the greatest pleasure arises from virtue—within a classical context,79 a closer consideration of just how the Utopians define happiness and pleasure reveals both the proximity of Utopian moral philosophy to monastic thought as well as the compatibility of these ancient and medieval traditions. In the midst of Hythloday’s almost unceasing acclamation of the Utopians’ diligence in learning, he does explicitly note that their pleasures are intellectual (see 175) and that they seek as much time as possible to “devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind” (135).

This goal—the studious repose of the individual away from the clamour of daily life—was, of course, sought by More’s circle of humanists, but, significantly, it is also an ancient custom upheld in the cloister. Monastic otium, the period of withdrawal used by monks to engage in lectio divina, has been considered since the time of the Church Fathers an essential spiritual exercise for the ethical and intellectual formation of the

79 See for example Logan, Adams, and Miller’s introduction to their edition of Utopia (xxxi) as well as Logan’s The Meaning of More’s Utopia (176).
monk. Although he does not explicitly note a comparable custom to meditative reading in Utopia, More does foreground the importance of retreat for personal improvement and contemplation of nature as a form of worship (229). Concluding his discussion of Utopian occupations, Raphael underscores the fundamental importance of _otium_ to Utopian society when he notes that the “chief aim of their constitution is that... all citizens be free to withdraw as much time as possible from the services of the body and devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind” (135). Shortly afterwards, Raphael relates that in addition to studious withdrawal, Utopians view “the contemplation of nature” as a form of “worship acceptable to God” (229). Given that the Utopians lack an authoritative sacred text, it is not surprising that they have not developed such an involved reading practice as _lectio divina_ or that they contemplate nature rather than a text to reflect on God’s presence in the world. Of course, this fact should not diminish the important role literature plays in Utopia. The exemption, for example, from manual labour which the study of letters entails as well as its requirement for eligibility for many offices such as those of priest or prince are simply a few indications of the Utopians’ privileging of texts. What is significant, however, is that both communities utilize periods of withdrawal to ensure the perpetual formation and intellectual development of their individual members along similarly restrictive lines. In Utopia, as in the monastery, the cultivation of the individual’s interiority is—somewhat paradoxically for a culture that seems to efface individual liberties—a process that continues through the whole of one’s life. While Travis DeCook argues that the severe restrictions imposed on the

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80 Contemplation of God through nature does bear some resemblance to Franciscan spirituality. See, for example, Ilia Delio’s _A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World_.

81 Baker, after noting the important role that books play in Utopian society, labels them “a community of readers” (70-71).
Utopians’ private space results in their complete lack of interiority (11), I would argue. Utopian society provides just as much scope for interiority, even if its citizens defined themselves in terms of their contribution to the community. The Utopian polity seeks instead to shape its society along very specific lines that ensure the optimal cohesion of the community, and it is in this fundamental attitude towards individual formation and its role in fashioning a community that shares a uniform set of ideals that Utopian pedagogy most clearly resembles monastic practices.

Similarities between the routines of monastic life and the lives of the Utopians also highlight important differences between these two communities. The regimen of daily activities observed in the cloister is above all directed toward a single end that transcends the individual: the worship of God. This task is the goal and justification for their distinctive *conversatio*. The Utopians, however, rigorously engage in intellectual pursuits solely for individual fulfilment. Even though the methods they use to achieve their respective ends are very similar, their goals are very different. I would suggest that this difference owes a lot to the purpose of *Utopia*. More’s aim is not to discuss the best state of a Christian commonwealth. Until the most recent arrival of Europeans, the Utopians had lived happily without the moral norms of Christianity, and unlike the monastery, allowed for a range of different religious views. Because of Christianity’s absence from the development of Utopian institutions, More’s adaptation of monastic culture focuses primarily on the forms of monastic life in isolation from its central religious elements. The adaptation of *otium* is an important example of how More synthesizes monastic elements of his society with those more obvious classical borrowings. While Utopia’s religious tolerance allowed More to incorporate a great deal
from Platonic and Aristotelian sources when crafting his ideal state, such as the role of education in one’s moral formation, he transforms these ideals into practicable models by adapting monastic patterns of behaviour that were immediately available to him. Thus, although More is eager to align his work with contemporary literary fashions emerging from Italy by signalling his humanist debts to Greek letters, models of monastic discipline are employed to give shape to this rigorously just society.

Extremely devout himself, More did not draw on the structure religious life to shape his ideal commonwealth simply because it was a model with which he happened to be well acquainted. Although partially ironic, his use of monasticism in *Utopia* anticipates political beliefs he would grapple with later in his controversialist writing. In accounting for *Utopia*’s strategy of conveying serious arguments under the veneer of a humorous narrative, Logan, Adams and Miller slot More’s work into the “seriocomic mode” that employs irony “to qualify or undercut any statement” (*Utopia* xxvi). Certainly More accomplishes this through his paradoxical Greek coinages, but he seems to be equally playful with the concerns of intellectual, moral and spiritual life when he separates an entire way of living from its animating idea. More’s ironic thought-experiment of creating a monastery without Christianity provides serious answers not only to maintaining the cohesion of society but also to difficult questions related to the concentration of secular and ecclesiastical power.

In place of political or clerical hierarchies, which entrusted absolute authority in one individual, More favoured an alternative model of distributing power based on the consent of subjects or believers. Always opposed to tyranny, More not only resisted

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82 On the use of rhetorical paradox in the early modern period, see Colie 5.
83 These three concerns are indicated by Colie as crucial to *serio ludere*, serious playing, in her discussion of Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* (21).
Henry VIII’s movement toward absolutism but also expressed a wariness towards papal primacy as well. Rather than channelling power toward one individual, More favoured a system based on “communal authority.” Indeed, according to More, the authority of the Church owed its validity to a consensus of opinions that bound the Christian community together. This appeal to communal authority is not restricted to More’s attitudes towards clerical authority: as John Headley notes, the notion of grounding authority in a consensus of beliefs is “an idea that was fundamental to his political thought and that of northern humanism” (CW 8: 773). Despite the king’s and the pope’s continual drift toward absolute power, More’s ideal polity did have one contemporary analogue: the monastery. Within the monastery, the use of chapter ensured that the abbot did not, as Knowles comments, “act without the formal consent of his community” and served as “a salutary check upon irresponsible action.” The devolution of authority within the monastery played an important role in balancing the power of the abbot.

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84 In a letter to Thomas Cromwell, dated 5 March 1534, More in fact confesses that at one point he harboured serious towards the notion of papal primacy until reading Henry’s Assertio: “I was my selfe some tyme not of the mynd that the prymatie of that see shold be bygone by thinstitution of God, vntil that I redd in that mater those thingis that the Kingis Highnes had written in his moost famous booke agaynst the heresyes of Marten Luther” (Rogers 498). Moreover, More tells Cromwell that he advised Henry to leave out any statements on the issue in case Henry should at some point in the future fall into disfavour with the pope (see Rogers 298).

85 CW 8: 1280. Marius uses this phrase to characterize More’s idea that ecclesiastical (as well as political) authority derives from a consensus of beliefs and not the will of a single individual. My discussion of More’s notion of consensus is based on Marius’s “Thomas More’s View of the Church,” and Headley’s “More’s Ecclesiology in the Revised Responsio.”

86 More expresses this idea in his Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer (see CW 8: 248). Such consensus is evident, for example, in More’s defence of Church Councils. Aligning himself with the position of earlier conciliarists, More argues that when a dispute over any doctrine arises, a Council should be called in order to resolve the issue, since its members represent the entire body of Christians.

87 In 1460 Pope Pius II promulgated the bull Execrabilis that condemned all appeals from the Pope to a future general council. The passing of the Act of Supremacy transferred to Henry the headship of the English Church and led to More’s resignation as Chancellor of England.

88 Monastic Orders 412, 417. Knowles goes on to note other important benefits of chapter such as its being held “every day independently of any initiative on the part of the abbot, and had constantly to be used in witnessing and agreeing to quasi-routine actions and transactions” (416).

89 For a brief discussion of the gradual diffusion of authority within the monastery in the Middle Ages, see Lawrence 117-20.
Critical as he was of the state of contemporary monasticism—even within *Utopia*, he mocking critiques the excesses of the Benedictines by implying that England’s idle poor would be perfectly at home inside the cloister walls (77-78)—More looked to the monastery as an ideal community, ethical, well-disciplined and free from the threat of tyranny. It is these attributes that were likely responsible for rendering an individual as devout as More disposed to completely secularize the cloister in order to create his ideal commonwealth.

Given the numerous correspondences between Utopian and monastic culture, it is hardly surprising that the Utopians, as Hythloday reports, are drawn to Christianity. He tells us that the appeal of this religion to the Utopians lies in the fact that their esteem for communal life is shared not just by Christ but by “the truest groups of Christians” (221). Who this truest group is, however, seems to be slightly less oblique in More’s Latin, which reads “apud germanissimos Christianorum conventus” (220). That the word *conventus* is used to denote group strongly suggests Utopia’s affinity with an idealized religious community. Indeed, this suggestion is strengthened by the marginal note, most likely added by Peter Giles or Erasmus, placed directly next to the passage that glosses these groups as the “monasteries,” which, for More, must certainly have recalled the Carthusians. By including this unobtrusive remark about the “truest” Christians, More seems to be winking at his reader and pointing to an important aspect of *Utopia*’s intellectual genealogy that is often overlooked. At this point it is worth recalling Roper’s

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90 The deliberate use of such a monastic register to draw implicit connections between the community and the cloister is also a feature of the description of the Brahmans in Mandeville’s *Travels* and the brief poem *Alexander and Dindimus*.

91 In Peter Giles’ letter to Jerome de Busleyden which precedes the text of *Utopia*, Giles suggests that he is responsible for the accompanying marginal notes (27). However, Erasmus is credited for adding the *marginalia* on the title page of the 1517 edition.
Life: when More was locked in the Tower he pondered the firm resolve of the Carthusian martyrs. Upon considering the “greate difference” (Roper 80) that separates people who live in the world from those who live in the cloister, More identified the source of this difference in their pattern of life, which alternates between manual labour and long hours spent in reflective withdrawal. For More, it was this commitment to the efficacy of an austere and intellectually rigorous life, which both attracted him to the Carthusian order in his youth and which would later evoke such strong feelings of admiration from him near the end of his life, that provided him with a model for Utopian pedagogy.

Conclusion: Arriving at More’s Humanism

Crucial to my discussion of More’s use of monastic discipline to confront his apprehensions related to lay piety in the Life of Pico as well as broader issues related to social stability and the state’s restriction of its subjects through education in Utopia has been his adaptation of otium. More’s elevation of otium over negotium, although atypical among humanists (see Logan, Meaning 265), is fundamental to More’s strategy for providing both devout readers and studious Utopians with the tools (and feeling of enfranchisement) to enrich their own interior lives while at the same time prescribing strict restrictions on the manner in which this is done. As a vernacular spiritual guide to pious living directed at an elite secular and religious readership, the Life of Pico offers an exemplary model of the pious aristocrat in the form of the re-imagined Pico della Mirandola whose quasi religious life is emphasized throughout the text. That Utopia, a
Latin work aimed at “provoking” new modes of thinking in its sophisticated audience,\textsuperscript{92} retains a completely secularized version of this practice of withdrawal suggests his belief in its importance to the best state of a commonwealth.

Years before More would become actively engaged as a controversialist against the Protestants,\textsuperscript{93} the \textit{Life of Pico} and \textit{Utopia} suggest that More shared in the growing concern (on the part of ecclesiastical authorities) over the resurgence of Lollardy between 1486 and 1522. Consistent with his later controversialist views, these texts place a great deal of importance on controlling the laity’s spiritual aspirations as well as guiding their private reflections. We know that More was already concerned with issues related to religious dissent even before Luther circulated his ninety-five theses in 1517. Indeed, the controversy surrounding the trial and death of the Lollard Richard Hunne in 1514 in London continued to occupy his attention years after the fact.\textsuperscript{94} In response to the anticlerical sentiment and debate over theological doctrine that the many heresy trials aroused, More returned to established forms of pious devotion in the \textit{Life of Pico} to promote orthodox practices that functioned to reinscribe the teachings of the old faith. The homogeneity of More’s thought may also be detected by situating \textit{Utopia} within a pre-Reformation context. In addition to considerations such as DeCook’s over how \textit{Utopia} responds directly to “latent tensions in understandings of communication” in the early sixteenth century and “reflects the new possibilities for the transmission and reception of knowledge” (2), More’s text, as I have argued, demonstrates a palpable concern over managing the Utopians’ interior lives by harnessing their desire for long

\textsuperscript{92} See DeCook 14. This notion is also expressed by Warren W. Wooden and John N. Wall in “Thomas More and the Painter’s Eye” (233, 236).
\textsuperscript{93} John Guy provides an excellent survey of scholarly opinions on More’s campaign against the spread of Protestantism in England in \textit{Thomas More} 106-15.
\textsuperscript{94} For a discussion of More’s involvement in the Hunne affair, see Marius 123-40.
periods of private intellectual development and controlling the directions in which this desire for improvement would follow.

Finally, the importance of More’s exposure to monasticism in his native England has been repeatedly downplayed by scholars in favour of his association with Erasmus’s circle of northern European humanists as well as his debts to Greco-Roman literature. Certainly, it would be disingenuous simply to reverse this inequality and stress the influence of the cloister on More at the expense of other factors: what this discussion has sought to demonstrate is that even in his pre-Reformation works, More drew upon a nexus of ideas rooted in his experience and understanding of monastic discipline in order to address concerns about individual formation and what constituted a virtuous life as well as issues related to social stability, the restriction of lay piety, and other forms of private intellectual endeavour. My study has attempted to remedy the lack of attention paid to his experience among the Carthusians and the devotional practices he observed with them immediately preceding his remarkable literary and political careers. More’s persistent drawing upon monastic devotional and literary culture forces us to question prevailing notions that do not consider his dedication to England’s monastic heritage and insist on seeing him solely as a humanist. Critics, quite rightly, slot More into the category of northern humanist, yet many of these same critics (again, quite rightly) are careful to note More’s atypical attitudes among this group. Especially insightful are the observations of Skinner and Logan. Skinner first noted two significant departures in More’s attitudes from commonly-held humanist positions: the divorcing of social rank from virtue and the dissolution of private property (see Skinner 259-61). Like Petrarch,
More arrived at certain classical traditions via his monastic ones.\textsuperscript{95} Recognizing this
more roundabout \textit{translatio studii} by focusing greater attention on how More draws upon
monastic devotional culture to articulate concerns, such as reading and engagement in
public affairs, that we might tend to consider more the domain of humanism will also
force an examination of the close intellectual and ideological connection between
monasticism and humanism within an English context.

\textsuperscript{95} On Petrarch’s intellectual genealogy, see Fumaroli 129-52.
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