

Inscriptions and Ways of Owning Books among the Sisters of Syon Abbey

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the phenomenon of personal inscriptions in manuscripts and printed books associated with the sisters of Syon Abbey (founded 1415), the sole English Birgittine house. It argues that personal inscriptions reveal the Syon sisters' complex ownership-like relationships with their books, and that the sisters were able to demonstrate both their individual and communal devotional identity through their interaction with each other and their books. In the first section, the article defines 'ownership' in its legal context and discusses it in relationship to 'use'. The second section closely reads the Syon legislative documents to discuss the sisters' conceptualizations of book ownership within the bounds of their order. The third section discusses the practice of inscription, using evidence from extant Syon manuscripts and early printed books. The fourth section brings these contexts together to discuss two cases of hybrid book ownership: the functional ownership developed through repeated use of the Syon processions, and the collective individual ownership of multiple copies of printed books. The article presents a new way of understanding inscriptions and their potential for community building and individuation at Syon Abbey and contributes to our understanding of women's reading experiences and ownership practices in England at the turn of the sixteenth century and the late-medieval period as a whole.

At some point in the early sixteenth century, Audrey Dely (d.1579), a sister at Syon Abbey, England's only Birgittine house, wrote in her printed copy of *The Chastysyng of Goddes Childern* and *The Tretyse of Love*, 'This boke is myne, Syster Awdry Dely, of the gyfte of Syster Mary Nevell. God reward her in heven for yt'.¹ This inscription is a good example of how personal inscriptions found in books and manuscripts associated with the Syon Abbey sisters are inextricably linked with the experience of ownership among the English Birgittines, who were at once encouraged to have of

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1 Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, 4^o Theol. Mor. 138/S, f. 1^r.

books ‘as many as they wyll in whiche ys to lerne or studye’, yet were forbidden from property, the first of the sisters’ ‘most greuous defautes’.² The inscription contains a number of the most explicit hallmarks of what could be considered to be ‘ownership’: Audrey Dely identifies the book as ‘myne’, rather than using an ambiguous word like ‘perteneth’, and identifies the book as a gift from Sister Mary Neville, the Syon chantress (d.1557/8).³ Neville clearly had enough of a claim on the book to be able to decide who to gift it to, and Dely recorded the gift in a way that highlights that the act of gift-giving was not only acceptable but welcome, by writing ‘God reward her in heven for yt’. The most important feature of this inscription, however, is that Mary Neville gave the book to Audrey Dely in a way that referred to their profession, using their shared title ‘Syster’. The use of a religious title here suggests that this was a gift made after both women’s professions, while they were at Syon (either before the 1539 suppression or during the brief Marian Restoration, or perhaps even on the eve of the sisters’ dispersal). ‘Syster’ could even have been used defiantly while living in makeshift co-religious communities after the dissolution. Whatever the case, it was a title used in the context of the two women’s time within the Syon community. This inscription is one of many examples which provide evidence of the Syon sisters and their attitudes towards book ownership and book use. Indeed, almost 40 of the 65 extant books and manuscripts associated with the Syon sisters, more than from any other English medieval religious foundation, are inscribed by their owners, readers, and users. The understudied complexities of inscriptions like these and their relationship to the Syon sisters’ experience of book ownership and textual community form the basis of this article, which presents an imaginative reconstruction of attitudes toward the practice of inscription, book use, and book ownership at Syon Abbey.

Using inscriptions to infer ownership is standard scholarly practice, and, along with extant library catalogues and wills, is one of the ways of linking a manuscript to a religious house in reference works such as N. R. Ker’s *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*. This practice indicates a scholarly understanding that inscription is, in some form, also linked to ownership or use.⁴ Unlike the Syon brothers’ books, which were recorded by Thomas Betson in a library catalogue from the 1520s, no catalogue of the books used in the Syon sisters’ liturgical services or devotional study survives.⁵ Instead, scholarship relies on inscriptions and other extratextual evidence. Christopher de Hamel, Ann M. Hutchison, and David N. Bell have largely

2 *The Rewyll of Seynt Sauoure and Other Middle English Brigittine Legislative Texts*, ed. James Hogg, 4 vols (Salzburg, 1978), 2. 49–50 and 4. 15.

3 Christopher De Hamel, *Syon Abbey: The Library of the Bridgettine Nuns and their Peregrinations after the Reformation* (Otley, 1991), 108 and Veronica O’Mara, ‘A Syon Scribe Revealed by Her Signature: Mary Nevel and her Manuscripts’ in Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg and Mia Åkestam (eds), *Continuity and Change: Papers from the Birgitta Conference at Dartington 2015* (Stockholm, 2017), 285 identify Neville as the Syon chantress. See London, British Library MS Additional 22285, known as the *Syon Martiloge*, f. 35^v and f. 60^v/192^v respectively for obits for Dely (as ‘Etheldreda Dely’) and Neville. For further information on Neville, see O’Mara, ‘A Syon Scribe Revealed’, 283–308.

4 N. R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: A List of Surviving Books*, 2nd edn (London, 1964).

5 Vincent Gillespie (ed.), *Syon Abbey with The Libraries of the Carthusians*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues 9 (London, 2001).

reconstructed the sisters' extant books in this way.⁶ Scholars such as Hutchison, Mary Erler, C. Annette Grisé, and Susan Powell have built upon their reconstructive work to discuss how individual Syon sisters' books, identified by their inscriptions, were key tools in building community.⁷ Grisé compares the community-building function of books at Syon to Brian Stock's 'textual community', where religious foundations shaped their identities around the relationship between reading and devotion.⁸ Inscriptions are valuable tools in reconstructing the sisters' literary practice: Erler and Hutchison mention inscriptions as evidence of gifts to or from individual Syon sisters, and Veronica O'Mara uses inscriptions to discuss individual sisters' scribal practice.⁹ This scholarship on the Syon sisters' literacy and literate activities assumes a close personal relationship between the sister and the inscribed book both individually and within the larger community. Building on this foundation of research, I hope to extend the discussion by addressing the important relationship between inscription, the experience of book ownership, and the Syon textual community, thus enhancing knowledge of Syon Abbey's bookish community and enriching our understanding of religious women's experiences of reading and owning books in late-medieval England.

What, then, did it mean for a Syon sister to write her name in a book? As scholars, we often use inscriptions to attribute books to libraries, but did inscription mean ownership for the Syon sister writing her name in a book? According to Ker, inscriptions 'show . . . what a large amount of individual ownership there was in the monasteries of the later Middle Ages'.¹⁰ This connection between inscription and individual ownership has also been observed at other contemporary religious foundations. Paul Lee writes in his study of one of Syon's contemporary houses, Dartford Priory, that inscriptions revealing bequests of books made 'to nuns of Dartford by their relatives confirm that Dominican nuns did not continue to observe their earlier asceticism, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries'.¹¹ Lee makes a connection between gifts of books and a decrease in asceticism at Dartford, but this does not seem to have been the case at Syon. There, the relationship between reading, devotional experience, and ownership practices was closely knit, thanks to the affordances of the *Rule of Saint Saviour*. As we will see, the sisters' inscriptions have characteristics of Stock's 'textual community', where texts 'played a predominant role in the internal and external relationships of the members'.¹² I argue that inscriptions in the Syon

6 De Hamel, *Syon Abbey*, 48–133; Ann M. Hutchison, 'What The Nuns Read: Literary Evidence from the English Bridgettine House, Syon Abbey', *Mediaeval Studies*, 57 (1995), 205–22; David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1995), 171–210.

7 Hutchison, 'What the Nuns Read', 205–22; Mary C. Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2002); C. Annette Grisé, 'The Textual Community of Syon Abbey', *Florilegium*, 19 (2002), 149–62; Susan Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey: Preaching and Print* (Turnhout, 2017).

8 Grisé, 'The Textual Community of Syon Abbey', 149–62; Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), 88–92.

9 Veronica O'Mara, 'A Syon Scribe Revealed', 283–308; Veronica O'Mara, 'Nuns and Writing in Late Medieval England: The Quest Continues', in Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara and Patricia Stoop (eds), *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue* (Turnhout, 2015), 146.

10 Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, vii.

11 Paul Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society: The Dominican Priory of Dartford* (York, 2001), 28–9.

12 Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, 90.

Abbey sisters' books reveal a culture of hybrid communal and individual ownership-like relationships, which allowed for the cultivation of devotional identity among the sisters. In this way, the sisters' inscriptions allowed them both to grow their community through individual devotion and to assert their individuality within communal life.

In the discussion that follows, I first discuss the term 'ownership' in its legal and practical contexts, followed by a brief close reading of the *Rule of Saint Saviour*, the correspondence between Vadstena and Syon known as the *Responsiones*, and the *Syon Additions to the Rule*, in order to demonstrate that these legislative documents reveal strict prohibitions against property but a permissive ambiguity about the place of books within the community. Next, by systematically examining ownership inscriptions found in the extant manuscripts and early printed books attributed to the Syon sisters, we see evidence of the variety of personal relationships between the Syon sisters and their books, identifying four inscription types: 1) explicit ownership inscriptions, 2) dedicatory inscriptions, 3) prayer request inscriptions, and 4) nominal inscriptions, which are inscriptions that contain only a name. This typology, which is also applicable outside Syon, provides a basis for analysing the function of inscriptions, ownership, and textual community among the sisters of Syon Abbey. I then discuss the relationship between the Syon sisters' book ownership and use and the Syon textual community, and propose that inscriptions allowed the sisters to build both their own personal devotional identity and establish their place in the Syon community.

I. DEFINING 'OWNERSHIP'

Ownership is a term that can call to mind a number of interrelated concepts, both legal and social. Because the Syon inscriptions were made by professed nuns, the legal definition of ownership and use is only useful up to a certain point. Medieval property law made a difference between rights to 'title' and 'use': whereas 'title' implied legal rights, often to landed property, 'use' was a concept that allowed people to have legal rights to the profits coming from land belonging to others. Since the Syon sisters gave up their property at entry, they would have neither formal 'title' nor 'use' of their books.¹³ English women's formal property rights were limited in the late-medieval period: a secular woman's chattel property (that is, objects, rather than land) functionally became her husband's property at marriage through the common law custom known as *couverture*.¹⁴ Religious women, especially nuns, who were brides of Christ, presumably had even fewer property rights. Syon Sister Dorothy Slight, for example, prepared a will to divest herself of property before her 1535 profession and enclosure.¹⁵ Despite this, women's religious houses did have collective possessions in practice. Many monasteries bypassed the rules against

13 Sir Frederick Pollock and William Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1898), 229–31.

14 Cordelia Beattie, 'Married Women's Wills: Probate, Property, and Piety in Later Medieval England', *Law and History Review*, 37 (2019), 29–60; Janet S. Loengard, "'Which may be said to be her own': Widows and Goods in late-Medieval England', in Maryanne Kowaleski and P. J. P. Goldberg (eds), *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2008), 162–76.

15 Dorothy Slight's will is in PCC 30 Hogen (prob. 1535).

property by forming a monastic ‘corporation’ to own their lands and other income-producing property. Collective chattel property also existed, some of which (including, at smaller houses, books) was small and valuable enough to keep in lockable ‘evidence chests’.¹⁶ Despite the rule of poverty, it was also not uncommon for individuals in religious houses to have what we might consider to be personal possessions. Sheila Sweetinburgh describes a culture of personalized mazers among the monks of Christ Church Priory Canterbury in the thirteenth century, for example, calling the monks ‘monk-owner or user’.¹⁷ For Syon, just as at Christ Church Priory, the experience of ownership and use was more closely related to the reality of what was commonly practised than to what was prescribed in law.

In the case of the Syon sisters’ books, which would have been legally considered chattel property, it is more helpful to move away from formal legal definitions of property and consider ownership in the context of the reality of long-term or personal relationships between individual sisters and individual books, like Christ Church’s mazers. Such relationships include exclusive or frequent use of a book, officially or unofficially recognized rights to or control over a book (including the right to give it away), or close proximity to a book by one or more individual sisters, as a type of possession. How exactly the Syon sisters owned their books has come up fleetingly in scholarship: E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham describe a kind of private book use, almost like a loan, which allowed the abbey to own the book and the sister to keep it with her for an extended period of time.¹⁸ Laura Saetveit Miles agrees, describing ‘books on permanent or semi-permanent loan to a sister, kept among her few possessions and close at hand during the hours of contemplation and prayer’.¹⁹ This way, a sister could use a book privately for an indefinite period of time while it legally belonged to the order. This system was common in Benedictine orders; at Barking Abbey, the librarian assigned a book to each sister which she was supposed to read throughout the year.²⁰ In this situation, one could speculate that the sister receiving a book might think of it as ‘hers’, and inscribe it, despite the fact that it belonged to the Abbey and recirculated each year.

Throughout this article, I discuss ownership at Syon in connection with such ‘use’, which, it should be noted, is not a term synonymous with legal ownership. While frequent or exclusive use can feel like or even imply ownership, people do often use books that do not belong to them. Indeed, marking a book may be proof that a user wants to lay some kind of temporary claim on it, even if it is not officially theirs. In other cases, the original owner may choose to inscribe the book in order to

16 Marilyn Oliva, ‘Nuns at Home: The Domesticity of Sacred Space’, in Maryanne Kowaleski and P. J. P. Goldberg (ed.), *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2008), 145–61.

17 Sheila Sweetinburgh, ‘Remembering the Dead at Dinner-Time’, in Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (eds), *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings* (Farnham, 2010), 257–66.

18 E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham, ‘Introduction’, in E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds), *Syon Abbey and its Books: Reading, Writing and Religion c. 1400–1700* (Woodbridge, 2010), 1–38.

19 Laura Saetveit Miles, ‘Scribes at Syon: The Communal Usage and Production of Legislative Manuscripts at the English Birgittine House’, in Claes Gejrot, Sara Risberg and Mia Åkestam (eds), *Saint Birgitta, Syon and Vadstena: Papers from a Symposium in Stockholm, 4–6 October 2007* (Stockholm, 2010), 71–88.

20 Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety*, 31.

ensure its safe return; inscriptions might, therefore, imply ownership and use, but also the exchange of books within the Syon community. Inscriptions are therefore the physical hallmarks of these connections between readers, owners, and books.

II. EXAMINING SYON'S LEGISLATIVE DOCUMENTS

Did the Syon sisters' book ownership break the rules, so to speak, by contravening the Birgittine *Rule of Saint Saviour's* prohibition against personal property? *The Rule of St. Saviour*, which governed all Birgittines, and the *Additions to the Rule of St. Saviour*, which were Syon-specific and created for the use of the English house, allowed certain types of book ownership among the Sisters but also reveal some initial uncertainty on the community's part about the relationship between book ownership and the prohibition against property.²¹ It was especially important for the Syon community to read and understand the *Rule* because in addition to providing guidelines for their daily life, it was a devotional text in and of itself, since it had been revealed to Birgitta of Sweden as part of her revelatory visions.²² Gris , linking Stock's 'textual community' to Syon and the Birgittines, notes that Syon's identity was bound up in St Birgitta, her *Rule*, and her *Revelations*; in this way it is doubly important to understand the affordances granted to books by Syon's legislative documents since they not only influenced the practicalities of ownership, but also the way that inscriptions and books built the sisters' spiritual community.²³

The main legislative text, the *Rule of Saint Saviour*, was difficult for Syon to interpret in the early days after their foundation in 1415. Despite the 1425 bull *Mare Anglicanum*, which granted Syon independence from the Birgittine motherhouse in Vadstena, the English Birgittines asked their colleagues at Vadstena for advice in interpreting the *Rule* in 1421 and again in 1427 in a series of questions and answers known as the *Responsiones*.²⁴ It is uncertain how much the *Responsiones* influenced the later *Additions to the Rule of St. Saviour*, and, since the correspondence was undertaken by the brothers for their own edification, it is unclear how much of this advice was incorporated into rules for the sisters. Nevertheless, it is fair to suggest that the *Responsiones* are evidence both for practice at Vadstena and for the questions plaguing the early Syon community on both sides of the enclosure. Scholars' dates for the *Additions* are as early as the first quarter of the fifteenth century (Gillespie, Miles) and as late as 1470 (Michael Tait).²⁵ Regardless, they seem to be the latest of the three documents, and they, too, are unclear about the relationship between books and property. Taken as a whole, the three documents paint a picture of owning books at Syon.

21 *The Rewyll of Seynt Sauuioure*, ed. Hogg; *Additions to the Rule* also existed for the brothers, see Hogg, vol. 3.

22 Miles, 'Scribes at Syon', 73.

23 Gris , 'Textual Community', 149–62.

24 Elin Andersson (ed.), *Responsiones Vadstenenses: Perspectives on the Birgittine Rule in Two Texts from Vadstena and Syon Abbey: A Critical Edition with Translation and Introduction* (Stockholm, 2015).

25 Vincent Gillespie, 'The Book and the Brotherhood: Reflections on the Lost Library of Syon Abbey', in A. S. G. Edwards, Vincent Gillespie, Ralph Hanna (eds), *The English Medieval Book: Studies in Memory of Jeremy Griffiths* (London, 2000), 185–208; Miles, 'Scribes at Syon', 74; Michael Tait, *A Fair Place: Syon Abbey 1415–1539* (Lexington, KY, 2013), 314.

The *Rule* treats devotional books as an exception to the prohibition against property but is ambiguous enough in its wording to present several alternatives to how this ownership functioned. In chapter 18, after discussing chalices of silver and gold, the *Rule* reads as follows (emphasis mine):

Bookes also are to be had as many as be necessary to do dyvyne office and *moo in no wyse*. Thoo books they shall have as many as they wyll in whiche ys to lerne or to studye. Ffarthermore iche awter must be content wyth two ornamentys and two paramentis for festful dayes and ferialt *moo of all thinges above writte shull never be hadde in propyr possession of the monastery* (49).

Roger Ellis suggests that the *Rule* indicates that the sisters were free to have as many books as they wished, rather than only what was necessary, but here the *Rule* specifies that while devotional books could be held at will, liturgical books were limited by necessity.²⁶ However, Ellis's reading of the *Rule* does not make a distinction about whether 'as many as they wyll' refers to the will of the sisters as a whole, led by the abbess, or that of individual sisters regarding the quantity of their own personal books. From Dartford, an inscription survives that claims a book was used by Pernelle Wrattisley 'by licence of her abbas', which suggests a third possible scenario: one where the abbess was responsible for permitting individual possession: either institutionally, as at Barking, or on a case-by case basis.²⁷ Either way, this freedom seemed to confuse the Syon brothers, who asked their colleagues at Vadstena for a clarification.

Their confusion likely grew out of the fact that the *Rule* clearly prohibits the sisters from keeping property. In the early days of Syon's existence, the text of the *Responsiones* indicates that the relationship between property, necessity, and book ownership was a concern for the community. The first chapter of the *Rule* reads,

Therfor be it lefull to none to haue eny thyng propir; no maner thing be it never so lityll or for to have oon halpeny in possession or towche it with hondys ne to have ony thyng of gold or syluyr. . . . All necessities are to be hopyd of the abbesse that ys to sey regulere clothyng beddyng and instrumentys of werke nor they owe to have ony thyng that the rewill sufferyth not (50–1).

Seemingly, Syon required clarification, since in the *Responsiones* they asked Vadstena, 'what should be called property?' ('Quid dici debeat "proprium"?'). Vadstena replied, 'Everything that a religious man has, owns, gives or receives, without permission from his prelate, is called "property of his own"' ("Proprium" dicitur omne id, quod religiosus sine permissione prelati habet, possidet, dat vel

26 Roger Ellis, *Viderunt eam Filie Syon: The Spirituality of the English House of a Medieval Contemplative Order from its Beginnings to the Present Day*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 68 (Salzburg, 1984), 28–9; discussed further in Ann Hutchison, "'To your gostly comferte and profite': Devotional Reading for the Nuns of Syon Abbey', in Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara, and Patricia Stoop (eds), *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Antwerp Dialogue* (Turnhout, 2017), 61–82.

27 Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 322, f. i^r.

recipit . . .’) (105). Given Vadstena’s broad definition of property, it is then surprising that question 114 reads,

Q: Whether the abbess or the confessor, or a sister or brother with their permission, is allowed to own special or precious things, not sent to them by parents or friends, but taken into the monastery by themselves, or provided and given to them by the abbess.

(‘Item, utrum licet abbatisse seu confessori aut alicui alteri sororum aut fratrum ex eorum permissione habere aliqua specialia seu iocalia licet non a parentibus seu amicis suis ipsis transmissa, sed forte secum ad monasterium asportata vel per abbatissam ipsis provisa et contradita.’)

A: All precious things of gold and silver, and all other things that lead to levity and destruction of the mind, are prohibited in the Rule. However, we believe that it may be allowed to give somebody a costly book of psalms or prayers for daily use, or something necessary of this kind (163).

(‘Omnia iocalia de auro et argento et omnia alia, que movent ad mentis levitatem et dissolutionem, in regula prohibita sunt. Sed dare alicui librum psalterii preciosum seu orationum pro quotidiano usu, vel aliquid huiusmodi necessarium, credimus licere.’)

By asking this question, the Syon brothers reveal that there were enough gifts arriving at Syon to warrant concern. The practice at Vadstena seems to class ‘a book of psalms or prayers for daily use’ within the *Rule*’s exceptional category of ‘necessaires’ or ‘instrumentys of work’ despite its similarity to other ‘special or precious things’. This understanding of allowing what is ‘necessary’, a word repeated in both the *Rule* and *Responsiones* (as ‘necessarium’), is important to parse when considering the potential for book ownership at Syon, since it was up to the community as led by the abbess to decide what that meant.

The *Additions*, which perhaps reflect the development of Syon’s understanding of the *Rule*, also emphasize that sisters are allowed only necessities. Property is the first of the ‘most greuous defautes’ (15). In order to enforce this, the *Additions* allowed the abbess to perform searches of sisters’ cells ‘so that eche suster haue her necessaryes and no more’ (200). In their response to question 114 above, the *Responsiones* classed one personal book as ‘something necessary’ (‘necessarium’), and the *Additions* seem to support this allowance, implying a book may have been permissible as a necessary item, since the cost of a sister’s living after her profession is described as follows: ‘it is reson that [a sister’s friends or family] pay for alle her necessaryes, and for alle the costes, in the day of her profession, purueyng for her bokes, beddyng, profession ryng, dyner, offeryng, and such other’ (83). Here the text refers to books in the plural but equates books with necessities such as bedding and dinner, rather than treasures. Thus the *Additions* provide evidence that the Sisters may have followed Vadstena’s advice in the *Responsiones*, allowing the sisters to treat the ‘books they shall have’ as necessary, and therefore permissible property. The *Additions* make further references confirming that the sisters kept some books for

their own individual use outside the library. They say, 'if any [sister] stele or destroy any comen register, or any comen euydence, or els put oute or sette in any thyng in the comen registryrs or comen bokes, withoute the comen deliberacion and assent,' then a sister must be chastised (149). A description of the Bishop's duties during a visitation says that he should see 'if ther be an inventory or register of the bokes of the library, and how they and other bokes of study be kepte and repayred' (42). If the placement of the word 'they' refers to the registers, then the 'other bokes of study' must be the remaining library books, which supports the hypothesis that books of study were kept in the library. However, if 'they' refers to the 'bokes of the library', then the 'other bokes of study' exist outside the library. In that case, one could guess that they were in the possession of individual sisters. The images of possible models for the Sisters' book ownership blur here. I believe that most likely they had a combination of both central and individual control over books, allowing for a hybrid of communal and individual ownership. Examining inscriptions made by sisters provides further nuance and clarity about the different types of relationships the Sisters had with their books.

III. INSCRIPTION AT SYON

Inscriptions in the Syon sisters' books indicate that an individual relationship with books like that of ownership existed on the part of the sisters, even as the books were used and owned both individually and communally. In other words, the different kinds of inscriptions prove that there were many ways for the sisters to own and use their books. This mix of individual and communal ownership and use can be seen through the lens of the four types of inscriptions at Syon I identify here: explicit ownership inscriptions, dedicatory inscriptions, prayer requests and nominal inscriptions. Ultimately, these conceptualizations of inscription and ownership reveal a desire among the sisters to claim an individual connection to books that they used, and to participate actively in Syon's devotional life and textual community by altering those books.

Before discussing the relationship between inscriptions and ownership, there are a few practical considerations about inscriptions, their frequency, their dating, and their typology to take into account. Based on dating and frequency, inscribing a name in a book seems to have been a common and likely significant practice among the Syon sisters. There are ownership inscriptions in 38 or just over half of the nearly 60 extant manuscripts and printed books that Bell and De Hamel associate with the sisters, although the volume of books at Syon during its heyday was certainly greater than what survives today.²⁸ When considering pre-Suppression practice at the Abbey, it is important to ensure inscriptions were neither made by Syon sisters before their professions and given to the library upon entry or inscribed after the Abbey's suppression in 1539. All but two inscriptions date to the sixteenth century, or the latter part of Syon's pre-Dissolution existence.²⁹ Some include a specific date, while others are datable by locating the name of the inscribing sister in the Syon

28 Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 171–210; De Hamel, *The Medieval Manuscripts of Syon Abbey*, 114–24.

29 London, British Library, MS Harley 2387, a copy of Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* donated by the early fifteenth-century anchoress Margery Pensax, and University of Exeter, Exeter University Library MS 262/2,

Martiloge, which provides a death year for some sisters, and thus a *terminus ad quem* for each inscription. If the death date of the inscribing sister recorded in the *Martiloge* is before 1539, her inscriptions were obviously written before or during the sister's profession at Syon. Many named sisters died after 1539, some of whom continued to live together following their departure from the Abbey. It is possible that some of these inscriptions date from then, since it is difficult to determine changes in an individual hand over time, and using palaeography to determine the date of an inscription from before or after the Dissolution is inconclusive. However, the inscriptions themselves provide other evidence that suggests that they may have been made at Syon, including textual references like 'in Syon' or 'professyd in Syon', or references to a sister's title. References like these also rule out the inscription being made before a sister's profession, since she would not previously have had the right to the title.

Without a convenient reference, however, it is difficult to determine whether a book was inscribed pre- or post-profession. The books that are most likely to have belonged to a sister pre-profession are the ones with inscriptions consisting only of the sister's name. These 'nominal inscriptions' do not have any information connecting them to Syon. The Syon brothers' *Registrum* shows that a brother's books entered the library on the same date of his profession, which suggests that brothers joining the Abbey would surrender their personal books at entry.³⁰ In the same way, the sisters' nominal inscriptions have traditionally been associated with Syon and the books are expected to have been amalgamated into the sisters' library at entry. If an inscribed book entered the library directly at profession, any other sister reading the book would see the inscription and think of the named sister, and her name would always be part of the community of readers attached to the book, creating a continued personal connection with it. As is the case with most Syon inscriptions, the personal and the communal overlap.

What follows is a short description with examples of the four different types of inscriptions I have identified among the Syon sisters' extant books. Each of these categories provides evidence for ownership, broadly defined, on the part of the Syon sisters. This typology is neither exhaustive nor exclusive; arguments can be made that one inscription falls into more than one type, and there may be other possible categorizations. (See Appendix A for a full list of inscriptions and their shelfmarks.) For the purposes of this current study, however, I propose the following.

Explicit ownership inscriptions are the easiest to connect to potential private ownership of books by the Syon sisters because they use different degrees of proprietary language. These inscriptions show an individual's claim to the book using words that range from the unambiguous 'belongeth' or 'ownethe' to the more ambiguous 'perteneth'.³¹ Ker comments on this ambiguity in the context of similar Latin inscriptions, which have the function of 'marking books in the temporary

a devotional compilation produced in London with obits for Alice Langton, d.1491, are datable to the fifteenth century.

30 Gillespie, *Syon Abbey*, xxxix–xl, lii.

31 'Perteneth' here should be compared with the Latin 'pertinet', see Daniel Wakelin, "'Thys ys my boke": Imagining the Owner in the Book', in Mary Flannery and Carrie Griffin (eds), *Spaces for Reading in Later Medieval England* (New York, NY, 2016), 13–34.

keeping of individual monks'.³² However, he also emphasizes that inscriptions like these 'took place under the absolute ownership of the religious house', which would have been 'so obvious' to the writers.³³ Eight manuscripts, or just over 20 per cent, contain explicit ownership inscriptions. New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, Eng. 1519, a printed copy of Catherine of Siena's *The Orchard of Syon*, bears the inscription on the final pastedown, 'This boke perteynyth to syster Elyzabeth Stryckland, professyd in Syon'. Another book, a British Library incunable copy of Nicholas Love's *The Myrroure of the Blessed Lyf of Ihesu Cryste*, contains 'Susan Purefeye owethe thys booke'.³⁴ London, British Library, MS Harley 993 states, 'Thys boke is suster anne colvyll' on the front flyleaf and 'D Anne Colvyll' on the end leaf, in a formal hand. These statements of ownership from Elizabeth Strickland (d.1542), Susan Purefoy (d.1570), and Anne Colville (d.1531) imply that despite the prohibitions against private property, some concept of ownership existed among the Syon sisters, and that the sisters wanted to mark their ownership.³⁵

Dedicatory inscriptions formalize a gift or a donation to Syon or to an individual sister from the outside world, similar to the scenario Vadstena outlines in the *Responsiones*. Five extant books, or just under 15 per cent of all inscribed volumes, contain gift inscriptions. Gift inscriptions imply an implicit intention on the part of the donor of ownership by the dedicatee, since they usually contain the names of the sender and the intended recipient. However, unlike explicit ownership inscriptions, which contain a direct statement from the inscriber, dedicatory inscriptions do not necessarily guarantee that the book reached its intended recipient. Although these inscriptions may appear to indicate a private relationship, by writing down inscriptions, inscribers were necessarily making their dedications and marginal conversations semi-public, since they would not be able to control who would read the book later.³⁶ Consider the (perhaps infamous) example of dedicatory inscriptions in the books given to Sister Joan Sewell (d.1532) by the Carthusian James Grenehalgh (d.1530).³⁷ In particular, the copy of Walter Hilton's *Scala Perfectionis* in the Rosenbach Collection is heavily annotated by both Sewell and Grenehalgh.³⁸ It was presumably a profession gift to Sewell from Grenehalgh, who served as her tutor, and contains numerous inscriptions connecting the manuscript to each of them.³⁹ The verso of the title page, among numerous other inscriptions, says 'Liber cartusiani

32 Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, xviii.

33 Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, xxvi.

34 In this case, 'owethe' has a closer meaning to modern English 'own' rather than 'owe'. See *Middle English Dictionary*, *ouen*, *v.*, defined as 'to possess, have, own, rule'.

35 Obits for Strickland, Purefoy, and Colville appear on f. 24^v, f. 68^v, and f. 61^v, respectively of the *Martiloge*. For information on Colville, see Virginia Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: Women and Learning c. 1415–1600', in E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham (eds) *Syon Abbey and its Books: Reading Writing and Religion, c. 1400–1700* (Woodbridge, 2010), 82–103.

36 For conversational marginalia, see H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven, CT, 2001), 81–100.

37 For information about Grenehalgh and his removal from Sheen Charterhouse, see Michael G. Sargent, 'James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic', *Analecta Cartusiana*, 85, 2 vols (1984), 1. 85–109. A record of Sewell's burial appears on f. 192^r of the *Syon Martiloge*.

38 Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Inc. H491.

39 Sargent, 'James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic', 2. 330–477, discusses Grenehalgh's treatment of the *Scale of Perfection* with attention to the Rosenbach copy.

Schene Jhesu Bethlehem qui Grenehalgh Monke professus' ('Book of the Carthusians of Sheen, where Grenehalgh is professed'); later there is an inscription reading, 'This boke belongeth to dame Jhone Sewell Syster in Syon Professed in the yere of oure salvacion one thousand and fyve hundreth JGS in die sancti vitalis martiris xxviii April' (sig. [a iv]^v). Many annotations are individualized, like the unique J. G. S. monogram combining the names of the two annotators (e.g. one found on the front pastedown); notes including both of their names (e.g. 'Jacobus professus JS', sig. [H 7]^f); and the exhortation 'both you & me but loke up', (sig. [T iv]^f). These annotations, which are more like a private conversation between two people than publicly instructive glosses, demonstrate an expectation of at least semi-personal use by Sewell after her profession, because they are addressed to her specifically. By gifting the book at Sewell's profession, Greenhalgh may have believed that she would be able to keep it as her own personal property. However, this significant private interaction is displayed publicly in the margins of the text. Even if she had kept the book, there was no way of knowing who would read it after her, and the next reader would be privy to Sewell and Grenehalgh's private conversation, now made public.

Prayer request inscriptions include an exhortation to the reader, asking them to pray for a named party, and with seven inscribed volumes they make up just under 20 per cent of the inscribed Syon books. Although not all prayer requests were necessarily written on behalf of the book's owner, they, like nominal inscriptions, connect the book with the dedicatee in a potential reader's mind. Sometimes, the request is made in the first person: for example, Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 8885 instructs 'Anne dyngue amator dei memento mei' ('Remember me, Anne Dyngue, a lover of God') and 'Anne Amarsam amator dei obliviscere mei' ('[Do not?] Forget me, Anne Amarsam, a lover of God').⁴⁰ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 416 requests in the third person, 'Of your charyte prey for sustyr clemens trysburght', in addition to containing the names 'syster anne colvyll' and 'Scriptus Rhodo per Johannem Neuton die 25 Octobris 1459' ('Written at Rhodes by John Newton on 25 October 1459').⁴¹ In others, the request for prayer is made in the second person. One particularly long inscription pleads,

O vos omnes Sorores et Fratres presentes et futuri orate queso pro venerabili matre nostra Elizabeth Gibbis huius almi Monasterii Abbatissa. necnon pro deuoto ac religioso viro Willelmo Darker in artibus Magistro de domo Bethlem prope Shene ordinis Cartuciensis [sic]. qui pro eadem domina Abbatissa hunc librum conscripsit. Anno dominice incarnationis Millesimo CCCCC secundo.

40 See *Martiloge*, f. 27^f for Anne Dyngue (d.1517), listed as an admitted benefactress. Her parents made a gift of 500 marks to the abbey on her and her brother William's behalf, recorded on f. 71^v. See *Martiloge*, f. 60^v/191^v for Anne Amarsam (d.1533).

41 See *Martiloge*, f. 55^f for the undated obit of Sister Clemence Tresham. She is also briefly discussed in Virginia Bainbridge, 'Syon Abbey: Woman and Learning c. 1415–1600', 89. Johannes Neuton may be the John Newton who became abbot of Battle Abbey in 1463, see Catherine Nall, *Reading and War in Fifteenth Century England: From Lydgate to Malory* (Cambridge, 2012), 23–4.

(‘O sisters and brothers, present and future, I beg that you pray for our venerable mother Elizabeth Gibbs, Abbess of this nurturing monastery. And also for the devout and religious man William Darker, Master of Arts from the Carthusian house of Bethlehem near Sheen, who wrote out this book for the aforementioned abbess in the year of the incarnation of the Lord 1502’)⁴²

This inscription, made on behalf of ‘our’ Elizabeth Gibbs (d.1518), implies a collective request for prayer on the part of the Syon sisters, and, perhaps, Abbess Gibbs’s stamp of approval on the text, a translation Thomas à Kempis’s *Musica ecclesiastica*.⁴³ Furthermore, it formally records a commission between Abbess Gibbs and the Carthusian William Darker (d.1512).⁴⁴ Similar records of commission from the late fourteenth century exist at Barking Abbey, where inscriptions naming Abbess Sibilla de Felton (d.1419) exist in four separate codices.⁴⁵ Like nominal inscriptions, the prayer request does not offer any explicit indication of ownership, but it does link a name with a manuscript, implying connection on the part of the inscriber.

Finally, **nominal inscriptions** consist of one or two names, with few or no accompanying details, and are usually found in an informal hand on the flyleaves or boards of a book. These notes briefly draw readers’ attention to the named sister, regardless of whether the inscription was a pen trial or a pre-meditated inscription. Just under half of the inscribed extant books associated with the Syon sisters contain nominal inscriptions, making them the commonest type. Their characteristic informality and placement within the book make them difficult to classify, since they may just be pen trials rather than true owners’ marks. Ker accepts those that are not ‘mere scribbles’ in *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*.⁴⁶ However, even pen trials suggest that the purpose of these inscriptions was (possibly subconsciously) to link a sister and her book materially in a way that highlights the connection to others who came across the inscription later. Although they are usually found on the flyleaves or boards of a book, such as London, British Library, MS Harley 487, which bears the inscription ‘Suster Elyzabeth Ogull’ (fl. 1518) on the final flyleaf, nominal inscriptions are sometimes also found within the book block.⁴⁷ For example, London, Lambeth Palace, MS 546 contains the inscription ‘Sister EW’ in the bottom right corner of f. 56^r.⁴⁸ These nominal manuscripts sometimes bear multiple names at once:

42 Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 136 (T.6.18), f. ii^r.

43 See *Martiloge*, f. 52^v for her obit; also see Bainbridge, ‘Syon Abbey: Woman and Learning c. 1415–1600’, 89.

44 For William Darker, see A. I. Doyle, ‘William Darker: The Work of an English Carthusian Scribe’ in *Medieval Manuscripts, Their Makers and Users: A Special Issue of Viator in Honor of Richard and Mary Rouse*, a special issue of *Viator* (Turnhout, 2011), 199–211.

45 E.g. the inscription in the Barking Ordinal, Oxford, University College, MS 169. For further information on Abbess Sibilla de Felton’s commissions, see Donna Alfano Bussell with Jennifer N. Brown, ‘Barking’s Lives, the Abbey and its Abbesses’, in Jennifer N. Brown and Donna Alfano Bussell (eds), *Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture: Authorship and Authority in a Female Community* (York, 2012), 1–30.

46 Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain*, xxvi.

47 *Martiloge*, f. 23^r; G. J. Aungier, *The History and Antiquities of Syon Monastery: The Parish of Isleworth, the Chapelry of Hounslow* (Heston and Isleworth, 1840), 81 lists Elizabeth Ogull among the sisters at Abbess Constanca Brown’s 1518 election.

48 This refers to Sister Elizabeth Woodford, d.1523 (f. 191^r of the *Martiloge*). For discussion of London, Lambeth Palace, MS 546, see Veronica O’Mara, ‘The Late Medieval English Nun and her Scribal

Dublin, Archbishop Marsh's Library, MS Z 4.4.3, a devotional compilation, has the names 'Alys Rade' (d.1530) and 'Alys Hastyngs' (d.1525) inscribed on the final leaf.⁴⁹ While these and other inscriptions simply name the sister, some refer to a sister's title (e.g. Suster Elyzabeth Ogull). Others, such as Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS 13, directly reference the name's connection to Syon, as with 'Elisabeth Crychley off Syon 13 Ian anno 1521' (d. after 1555).⁵⁰ These references to Syon show the inscribing sister, the book, and her textual community juxtaposed together in the act of inscription. Nominal inscriptions not only imply potential ownership or use but also gesture to a personal connection between the sister and the book which (as will be discussed in the next section) placed a sister within her textual community.

IV. ASSERTING INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND PARTICIPATING IN THE COMMUNITY

Inscriptions at Syon served many functions: they could prove ownership, indicate intended use by an individual, call a named person to mind for purposes of prayer or memorial, or simply link a name with an individual manuscript or book. All of them were intended to be read. As Daniel Wakelin points out, ownership inscriptions necessarily imply that books circulated among readers, because inscriptions 'get their audience from that circulation. They not only mention but they implicitly address readers beyond the rightful owner'.⁵¹ This presents a duality for inscriptions: they at once individuate a book, and thus the inscriber, from a community of readers, but they also enfold the inscriber into that same community. As I have suggested, individual inscriptions, even when they demonstrate personal identification and possession of books, contribute to the juxtaposition of the named individual within her community, acting as a sign of a sister working as an individual alongside her literary community towards a shared devotional experience. The presence of inscriptions in Syon books was not just transformative for the sister who owned the book. According to Anthony Bale, 'this writing [i.e. ownership inscriptions] stays with the book, and becomes part of the book, like a scar showing battles fought'.⁵² The scars of Bale's metaphor imply that inscriptions are similarly permanent; by more or less permanently inserting their inscriptions into books, the Syon sisters were also inserting themselves into the narrative of reading and textual community at Syon in a way that not only connected them to their current sisters, but to all future sisters who would use the book thereafter. Inscriptions allowed sisters to both assert their

Activity: A Complicated Quest' in Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara and Patricia Stoop (eds), *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue* (Turnhout, 2013), 69–93.

49 Both sisters were buried in the Abbey: see the *Martiloge*, f. 191^v for Rade and f. 191^r for Hastings. Their scribal inclinations are discussed in O'Mara, 'Nuns and Writing', 146.

50 Bell refers to 'Elyzabeth Crucheley' and 'Elizabeth Crowcheley' on the 1539 Pension List and the 1554/5 Marian Pension List, 181. He further notes an 'Isabella Cruchley', d.1538, appearing in the *Martiloge* on f. 66^v, but this contradicts the evidence of the Pension Lists, so I find it unlikely that Isabella is the inscriber of this note.

51 Wakelin, 'This ys my boke', 16–7.

52 Anthony Bale, 'Belligerent Literacy, Bookplates and Graffiti: Dorothy Helbarton's Book', in Gill Partington and Adam Smyth (eds), *Book Destruction from the Medieval to the Contemporary* (Basingstoke, 2014), 89–111.

individual agency and identity as readers, and advertise their place in the Syon community of text and devotion.

Singing the liturgy at Syon was an important part of the sisters' daily devotional experience, since the unique Birgittine liturgy had, like the *Rule*, been divinely revealed to Birgitta of Sweden. Inscriptions in processionsals suggest that the Syon sisters treated their assigned liturgical books as though they were their belongings even though they technically were owned by the community, in a kind of ownership of repeated use. Inscriptions and annotations, in this case, made each book unique; the sisters left notes in order to read them later, just as a modern chorister would do in their score. The inscriptions not only prove this functional ownership, but serve as evidence of the sisters' individual religious experience as part of the choir. De Hamel has identified three processionsals, Cambridge, University Library, MS Additional 8885, Exeter, Exeter University Library, MS 262/1, and Oxford, St John's College, MS 167, all of which have nominal inscriptions of two or more names.⁵³ He suggests that since the sisters processed into the chapel in pairs, each pair shared a book and inscribed their names in it; however, the paired names are not always of sisters who were contemporaries. MS Additional 8885 was used by Sisters Anne Dyngue and Anne Amarsam, while EUL MS 262/1 was used by Sisters Dorothy Slight (professed 1535) and Constance Brown (d.1531), the latter of whom would serve as abbess from 1513 to her death.⁵⁴ While Dyngue and Amarsam could have processed in a pair, Slight and Brown could not; in this case, their inscriptions suggest that the liturgical books were passed along from sister to sister. Codicological evidence in Oxford, St John's College, MS 167, however, reveals that this paired processional can be considered to have been owned *ad usum* by Sister Mary Neville and Sister Thomasine Grove (d.1566), the two nuns whose names are inscribed on the flyleaf, and perhaps by as many as four others.⁵⁵ Neville's further additions to this manuscript, identifiable by her distinctive *textualis* hand, include tipped-in parchment slips adding to the litany of the saints between fols 80^v–90^r, personalizing the book for her use. Although it could be argued that these slips were added to the book as part of Neville's duties as chantress, they do not appear in other liturgical volumes that bear the mark of her care, notably MS Additional 8885. O'Mara argues that these additions are not in Neville's hand due to a lack of her distinctive downward serifs at the foot of her letters, but to my eye the slip between ff. 51–2 and the slip f.85^r of MS 167 do seem characteristic of her style and include those serifs.⁵⁶ I would suggest that these are her own personal additions for the book that she and her processional partner would have used in the course of her liturgical duties.

The inscriptions in MS 167 in particular indicate a level of customization that implies that the sisters who inscribed it expected to be able to use the processional for some time, implying a kind of ownership of repeated use. In addition to Thomasine Grove's signature, at least four other significant hands appear in the margins of MS 167, which I will call hands A through D. Hand A is most visible on the

53 De Hamel, *Syon Abbey*, 85–7.

54 Obits for Dorothy Slight (as Dorothea Slithe) and Constance Brown are on *Martiloge*, f. 29^r and f. 47^r, respectively.

55 See *Martiloge*, f. 61^r for obit of Thomasine Grove.

56 O'Mara, 'A Syon Scribe Revealed', 289.

left pastedown and the recto of the first flyleaf of Oxford, St John's College, MS 167, where it can be seen in two similar hexachord solmization charts. Hands B and C can be seen on f. 3^v, instructing the reader, 'in the ende of the boke at the marke of this letter A', to turn to a different section of the processional. Hand C appears at f. 17^v and instructs, 'Virgo mater resurgentis at k.' Hand D first appears at f. 21^v with the instruction 'vacat', and again at f. 23^r and f. 24^r with 'va' and 'cat' in the right-hand margin of each folio. These four hands are all concerned with the practicalities of singing the liturgy, and I suggest that their additions are similar to the notes that a modern chorister might make in a score, implying that the sisters who were assigned this book were able to personalize it with their annotations. In particular Hand D's treatment of the word 'vacat', or 'it is empty' (i.e. omit this from performance) is indicative of a chorister's activity; the spread of the word over two folios on ff. 23–4 suggests someone writing notes to remind herself not to sing this section rather than formal emendations or instructions. These notes would have needed to be written before or after the performance when the sister had access to her writing tools, either in her cell or in the sisters' library; the requirements for reading imply that inscriptions like 'vacat' were premeditated and the result of either official instruction or repeated mistakes on the part of the singer. The multiplicity of hands and the nature of their instructions suggests that the users of St John's College, MS 167 felt comfortable customizing the processional for their own practical use. This familiarity with the manuscript can be seen as the result of a kind of temporary practical ownership. Although the monastery formally owned the liturgical books, the sisters who were assigned each book clearly personalized them for their own use by signing their names and making practical notes for their individual singing, creating a unique shared liturgical and devotional experience each time they sang.

Another related example of the blurring of the line between individual and communal ownership can be seen through the Syon sisters' practice of commissioning multiple copies of the same work from early printers. By the early sixteenth century, the sisters, under the leadership of Abbesses Elizabeth Gibbs and Agnes Jordan (d.1546), likely commissioned and received books in numbers big enough to suggest that each sister could have had her own copy of the same text.⁵⁷ Powell's identification of inscriptions in several sets of extant copies of the same work corroborate this supposition: pairs of copies of *The chastysyng of Goddes chyldern* (1493), *Scala perfectionis* (1494), and *A deuout treatyse called the tree & xii. frutes of the holy goost* (1534/5) are indicative of this pattern of collective ownership.⁵⁸ To this list, I would add John Ricke's *The Ymage of Loue* (1525), of which Syon either ordered 60 copies or received them on spec.⁵⁹ Powell describes the 'unusual survival' of multiple copies of three different printed texts as evidence of sisters having their own individual copies of the same printed text, perhaps owned in pairs or passed from one sister to another.⁶⁰ In this situation, each sister individually having their own copy (which they

57 See *Martiloge* f. 25^r for undated obit of Agnes Jordan; a funerary brass at Southlands, Denham, where she retired after 1539, records her death year as 1546.

58 Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey*, 23.

59 Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey*, 23; Gris , 'Moche profitable', 139; Mary C. Erler, *Reading and Writing During the Dissolution: Monks, Friars, and Nuns 1530–1558* (Cambridge, 2013), 3.

60 Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey*, 23.

then might inscribe) implies a de facto communal ownership. If every sister had a copy of the same book, one could argue that they collectively all owned that book, yet, they each had access to a single copy that they could in turn personalize and make unique. In other words, they at once had a connection to the book collectively as a body of sisters, and as individuals.

But were these copies ordered by the sisters specifically as a sort of ‘class set’? The triangular relationship between Syon and the early printers has been well documented by Alexandra da Costa, C. Annette Grisé, and Susan Powell, who describe the process thus: the brothers wrote texts for the sisters, which the Abbess and Confessor General commissioned from the London printers, who then printed enough books for not only Syon, but for a wider lay audience.⁶¹ Da Costa stresses that this was due to the business savvy of Syon leadership, claiming that Abbess Jordan and Confessor General John Fewterer ‘were not using the printers as mere copyists, with the intention of producing books for the Abbey alone, they were actively increasing their saleability’ with an eye to marketing books to the laity as part of their own spiritual mission.⁶² Nevertheless, the multiple instances of the survival of several inscribed copies of the same text at Syon indicates that the sisters were also benefiting from this partnership with the London printers. Syon books were presumably profitable for publishers, given that the brothers continued to write books for the sisters, which could then also be read by the devout laity. The Syon sisters were a captive audience in more ways than one and needed devotional books to fulfill their *Rule*; for an enterprising bookseller, the sisters were a guaranteed sale of at least 60 copies, in addition to whatever was sold to the laity. Grisé supports the argument that the printed books were intended first and foremost for the Syon sisters (whether a speculative gift or an order), arguing that ‘the Syon sisters provided the model for the print audience and acted as a form of original patron as well in the texts that addressed them . . . in the prologues to these texts the Syon nuns are represented as readers’.⁶³

Although no extant copies of the *Ymage* have been identified with Syon provenance (likely because of an accusation of heresy that required the recall of all the copies), the order of 60 copies rather than one or two indicates that whether Syon was ordering books or receiving them from the printers, the books were intended to be distributed among the sisters.⁶⁴ The pairs of inscribed copies of *The chastysyng of Goddes chyldern*, *Scala perfectionis*, and *A deuout treatyse called the tree & xii. Frutes of the holy goost*, themselves examples of what Grisé describes as ‘one-stop devotional books that would keep orthodox readers busy for a long time’, could very well have

61 Alexandra Da Costa, *Reforming Printing: Syon Abbey's Defence of Orthodoxy 1525–1534* (Oxford, 2012); C. Annette Grisé, “‘Moche profitable unto religious persones, gathered by a brother of Syon’: Syon Abbey and English Books” in Jones and Walsham (eds), *Syon Abbey and its Books*, 129–54; Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey*. Books printed for Syon that enjoyed a wider audience include Simon Wynter’s *Life of Jerome* (1499), many of Richard Whitford’s works including *The Pype or Tonne of the Lyxe of Perfection* (1532) and *The Golden Epistle* (1530), John Fewterer’s *The Myrroure or Glasse of Christes Passion* (1534), and the anonymous *Dyetary of Ghostly Helthe* (1520).

62 Da Costa, *Reforming Printing*, 46.

63 Grisé, ‘Moche profitable’, 152.

64 For discussion of the *Ymage* and its heretical content, see Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2002), 202–6.

been ordered or received in sets as well.⁶⁵ It should be noted that these books could also be received in sets from patrons: Wynkyn de Worde, printer of the *Chastysyng* and *Scala perfectionis*, was no stranger to collaboration with Syon through his relationship with Syon patron Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509). Powell suggests that Beaufort's involvement with the printing of *Scala perfectionis* was related to Syon, and also points out that Beaufort made payments for the binding of 76 copies of the *Imitatio Christi* (1504) and for the delivery of 100 copies to Syon of an unnamed book, possibly also the *Imitatio*, from printer Richard Pynson.⁶⁶ Whether it was the sisters commissioning their own books or receiving them from patrons, it seems that the sisters had individual copies of the same texts. Perhaps, like the devotional compilations that are so frequently inscribed by Syon sisters, these books served a similar purpose to the small book of private devotions described by the *Responsiones*.

Another way of thinking about it is this: if the processions can be conceptualized by thinking about a modern chorister's book, these printed books can be conceptualized by thinking of the 'class set' of identical books found in a modern school. One might even consider the inscriptions as proof of temporary ownership that ensured the sister would be held responsible for returning the book in good condition. To extend the metaphor further, if the Syon commissions resemble schoolbooks, then the contents of the Syon commissions can be seen as a sort of approved curriculum for the sisters. This fact is interesting in the case of the potentially heretical *Ymage*, which, as Erler notes, may be evidence of 'reading that now might seem questioning, if not controversial'.⁶⁷ Ownership in this case, however, is slightly different than the example of the processions: if everyone has their own copy of the same printed book, because everyone has an identical book, unique ownership does not exist in the same way as it did in the examples of one-off books specifically gifted to individuals. Each individual, by reading the same text, is experiencing the same reading as her sister within the community.

The dual function of inscriptions can also be seen in the example of London, British Library, MS Cotton Appendix XIV, a manuscript containing psalms, the Birgittine Litany of Saints, the Office of the Dead, and Latin prayers with English rubrics. On f. 56^v, it is inscribed, 'Of youre charite praye for the swlys of John Edwarde and Margate his wyffe and for Elizabeth ther doughter professyd yn Syon for whos use thy boke was made' (emphasis mine).⁶⁸ This last clarifying note makes explicit that the parents of Elizabeth Edward (d. after 1561) expected her to be able to keep a book for herself, and while it may have been legally property of the Abbey, it was, for all intents and purposes, Edward's own book, for her use as long as she was professed at Syon. This book, unique in its inscription, marked Edward as an individual using her own book for her own devotion. However, after Edward died, the book would stay with the abbey, and this book would then serve as a memorial for both

65 Gris , 'Moche profitable', 140.

66 Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey*, 176, 189–90.

67 Erler, *Reading and Writing During the Dissolution*, 2.

68 London, British Library, MS Cotton Appendix XIV, f. 56^v; Elizabeth Edward is listed in the Syon *Martiloge*, f. 60^r, with an obituary date of 10 October. No year is given, but she is listed beneath Sister Margaret Dely (d.1561), implying Edward's death occurred after Dely's.

Elizabeth Edward and her parents. The names of all three Edwards would stay linked with the book as long as it remained undamaged, through reading by the next generation of sisters at Syon; in other words, they would become part of the community's experience when they read this manuscript. Though there are no Syon inscriptions that explicitly state that books were given to the abbey after a sister's death, there are some inscriptions in Dartford-affiliated books that instruct that after a certain sister's death, the book was to go to either the abbey or another named sister.⁶⁹ It is probable that this was also the case for books from Syon as well.

V. CONCLUSION

Syon was what Gris  calls a 'textual community' which placed great devotional value on books, both as symbolic and as devotional objects.⁷⁰ 'Texts and institutional documents', she writes, 'were key in defining the identity of the community'.⁷¹ Furthermore, because of the revelatory origins of *The Rule of Saint Saviour*, the physical act of interpreting and following its dictates by reading, owning, and by extension, inscribing books can be considered a devotional practice. Specific works written for the Syon sisters, like the *Myrroure of Oure Ladye*, emphasize the holy nature of reading and interacting with books. The author of the *Myrroure* instructs the Syon sisters that 'Devoute redyng of holy Bokes. ys called one of the partes of contemplacyon. for it causyth moche grace. and comferte to the soulle yf yt be well and dyscretely used'.⁷² Sisters were meant to help each other to read, however, 'And yf ye cannot understonde what ye rede. aske of other that can teche you. And they that can oughte not to be lothe to teche other'.⁷³ By explicitly inscribing her name and in some cases her ownership in one of these books, a sister would also be inserting herself as an individual into this imagined textual community, a reader among readers, advertising her devotion and her understanding of her reading. Not only would the inscribing sister see her own name in the text each time she took up her book, but any other sister reading the inscription would see the inscribing sister's name after her death and connect her with the book and its representation of the Syon textual community. Wakelin calls this type of insertion a 'biographical impulse': by recording a donation, the inscriber is necessarily recording the act of gift-giving as part of the book's own history.⁷⁴ The name becomes part of the history of the book, and part of the contemplative experience for the next sister reading it. This historicizing and community-building function of inscription can be compared with Anthony Bale's description of inscription: 'resolutely material and transgressively appropriative of textual and visual space', indicative of 'a belligerent literacy [using] writing and book crafts to convert the book from one state to another'.⁷⁵ Bale's concept of an almost forceful inscription, of claiming space in the book for the reader, transforms the

69 Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, 29.

70 Gris , 'Textual Community', 157.

71 Gris , 'Textual Community', 157.

72 John Henry Blunt (ed.), *The Mirroure of Oure Ladye*, Early English Text Society, Extra Series 19 (London, 1873), 65–6.

73 *Mirroure of Oure Ladye*, 67.

74 Wakelin, 'This ys my boke', 30.

75 Bale, 'Belligerent Literacy', 103, 98.

book from the state of before- to after-inscription. At Syon, however, the transformative effect of inscription need not be seen as disruptive or belligerent. Rather, inscriptions, by forming connections between readers, allow a sister to transform herself as well as her book into a participant in a community united through textual devotion.

The image of a Syon sister in her cell with a collection of institutionally provided incunables, gifted devotional manuscripts, and assigned liturgical books is a long way from Vadstena's suggestion of a single treasured volume kept only by necessity. Over the course of the long century of Syon's founding, flourishing, and suppression, the development of the Syon legislative documents' attitudes to books opened the door for the Syon sisters to not only own books but also to create a culture of ownership that allowed them to both assert their own individuality and create community at the same time. Syon is not the only place where inscriptions can tell a story about ownership, community, and devotion. The dedicatory inscriptions, explicit statements of ownership, prayer requests, and nominal inscriptions that we use to attribute this ownership can be found in books belonging to religious women and lay women alike. Just as the inscriptions found in Syon's processions and printed books reveal the intricacies of the devotional community of sisters, inscriptions found in books passed through families or within a group of friends can paint a picture of the complexities of late-medieval relationships and reading practices. A manuscript copy of *The Prick of Love and Pore Caitiff*, formerly Downside Abbey, MS 265412, is inscribed, 'this book is yove to Betryce chaumbre and after her decese to sustir Emme Wynter and to sustir Denyse Caston nonnes of dertforthe. And to abide in the saam hous of the nonnes of dertforthe for ever to pray for hem that yeve it'.⁷⁶ Just as at Syon, this inscription in a Dartford manuscript shows the interplay between the individual and the communal, inside and outside religious institutions. Inscriptions made at Syon and other abbeys perhaps mirrored the reading practices of women in the outside world, with an emphasis on individual devotional reading of family-owned books supported by a culture of communal book and manuscript exchange. Inside the abbey, where the *Myrroure of Oure Ladye* describes an ideal contemplative state that arises 'when ye rede by your selfe alone', the communal exchange and individual keeping of books helped the sisters read alone, together.⁷⁷

76 This volume was recently sold at auction by Sotheby's on 8 December 2020, Lot 1.

77 *Mirroure of Oure Ladye*, 67.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF INSCRIPTIONS

Below is a list of the ownership inscriptions discussed in this article and categorized by type. Some inscriptions may appear twice, and some manuscripts may contain more than one type of inscription. All transcriptions marked * are my own. The remaining transcriptions rely on Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 170–205, and *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* 3, <http://mlgb3.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.

Explicit Ownership Inscriptions

Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Library, MS 134

‘This booke belongyth to syster Elyzabeth Monton’, final leaf

Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, 4° Theol. Mor. 138/5

‘Thys boke is myne, Syster Awdry Dely, of the gyfte of Syster Mary Nevell. God reward her in heven for it’, f. 1^f

London, British Library, MS Harley 993*

‘thys boke is suster anne colvyll’, second flyleaf

London, British Library, IB.55119

‘Susan Purefeye owethe thys booke’, f. [a2]^f

New York, Morgan Library and Museum, PML 600*

‘Cest lyuere partient a moy Henry Parkar’, f. 1^v

‘Cest liure apertient a moy Marguerete Windesore’, f. 2^f

‘Thys boke ys myne, Margaret Yan[?] gevyn by master Parkar’, f. 174^v

New York, New York Public Library, Spencer Collection Eng. 1519*

‘This boke perteynyth to syster Elyzabeth Stryckland, professyd in Syon’, first back flyleaf

Oxford, University College, MS 25*

‘This booke perteyneth to me Elyzabeth Yate’, f. 4^f

Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Inc. H491*

‘This boke belongyth to Dame Jhone Sewelle, Syster in Syon, prefoessed the yere of oure salvation a thousand and five hundredth, f. [a.iv]^v

‘Liber cartusiani Schene Jhesu Bethleem qui Grenehalgh monke professus’, front pastedown

Dedicatory Inscriptions

Cambridge, Emmanuel College, MS 35

JS monogram, f. 21^v 78

‘Sewell Syonita Reclusa’, f. 22^f

London, British Library, Additional MS 24661*

JGS monogram, f. 18^v

London, British Library, MS Harley 2387*

78 Although the JS and the JGS monograms are not explicit mentions of a donation, the JS monogram is an indication of Grenehalgh pointing out a passage to Sewell and implies that he gave or lent her the inscribed book. For this reason I have agreed with Sargent, ‘James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic’, 75–109 and Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 173 in categorizing monograms in Cambridge, Emmanuel College, MS 35, and London, British Library, MS Additional 24661, as dedicatory.

'Istum librum legauit domina Margeria Pensax dudum inclusa apud Bysshoppisgate monasterio sancto Sauatoris de Syon iuxta Shene', f. 130^v

New York, Morgan Library and Museum, PML 600*

'Thys boke ys myne, Margaret Yan gevyn by master Parkar', f. 174

Oakley Park, Earl of Plymouth

Two historiated initials of Margaret Windsor, one with text 'Margareta Wyndesour', f. 97^v

Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Inc. H491*

Various monograms of Joanna Sewell, James Grenehalgh, and combined JGS monogram

Prayer Request Inscriptions

Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 8885⁷⁹

'Anne dyngue amator dei memento mei', inside board

'Anne Amarsam amator dei obliuiscere me', inside board

Dublin, Archbishop Marsh's Library, Z.4.4.3*

'Of yowr charyte pray for yowr sester Alys hastyngs', final pastedown

Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 136 (T.6.18)

'O vos omnes Sorores et Fratres presentes et futuri, orate queso pro venerabili matre nostra Elizabeth Gibbis, huius almi monasterii abbatissa, cuius cura hic liber conscriptus est anno dominice incarnationis millesimo CCCC secundo', f. i^v

'O vos omnes Sorores et Fratres presentes et futuri orate queso pro venerabili matre nostra Elizabeth Gibbis huius almi Monasterii Abbatissa. Necnon pro deuoto ac religioso viro Dompno Willelmo Darker in artibus Magistro de domo Bethleem prope Shene ordinis Cartuciensis, qui pro eadem domina abbatissa hunc librum conscripsit anno dominice incarnationis Millesimo CCCCC secundo', f. ii^r

London, British Library, G. 11740

'of your charyte I pray you to pray for dame Iohan. Spycer in syon', f. [A6]*

London, British Library, MS Cotton Appendix XIV*

'Of youre charite praye for the sowlys of John Edwarde and Margate his wyffe and for Elizabeth the daughter professed yn Syon for whos use thy [sic] boke was made', f. 56^v

Oakley Park, Earl of Plymouth

'Orate pro anima Andree Wyndesore militis', f. 15^f

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. D.4.7*

'Obitus Elyzabeth Ffetyplace 1556', f. viii^f

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 416*

'Of your charyte prey for sustyr clemens trysburght', final pastedown

Nominal Inscriptions

Ampleforth Abbey, C.V. 130

'Dorothe Coderynton', title page

Brussels Bibliothèque Royale/Koninklijke Bibliotheek, IV.481

'Elynor ffeteplace', final pastedown

79 While MLGB3 records 'amator dei' in both instances, Bell records 'O mater Dei', *What Nuns Read*, 178.

Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS F.4.13

'Elisabeth Crychley off Syon 13 Jan. anno 1521', f. 1^v

Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College, Bb.2.14

'Edyth Morepath' and 'Katheryn Palmer', f. 3^f

Cambridge, Trinity College, MS C.7.12

'Mart. Windesor: Domina de Syon', f. 1^v

Dublin, Archbishop Marsh's Library, Z.4.4.3*

'Alys Rade', 'Alys Hastyngs', f.127^f

Durham, University Library, MS Cosin V.v.12

Tressham', f. i^r

Durham, University Library, SB + 0903

'Clemence Tressham' and 'yn Syon', title page

Exeter, Exeter University Library, MS 262/1

'Dorothe Slyght', f. 1^r

'C. Browne', 'my lady Anne [de la Pole?]', f. 129^f

London, British Library, MS Harley 487*

'sust Elyzabeth Ogyll', final flyleaf

London, British Library, MS Harley 993*

'D Anne Colvyll' and 'Anne Colvyll', f. 39^v

London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 546*

'Good syster of your charyte I you pray, remember the scrybeler when that ye may, with an Ave Maria or els thys swete word Ihesu', f. 53^f

'Sister EW [i.e. Elizabeth Woodford]', f. 56^f

New York, Morgan Library and Museum, PML 600*

'Mastres Margrett Yan', recto of final flyleaf

Oxford, All Soul's College, MS 25*

'Rose pachet professyd in Syon', final leaf

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 416*

'Syster Anne Colvyll', second pastedown

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C. 941*

'E. M. [i.e. Elizabeth Monton]', f. 139^v

Oxford, Bodleian Library, 4^o W.2 Th. Seld.

'Elynor ffetyplace', final leaf

Oxford, Jesus College, MS 39*

'Dorothe Slyght', f. iii^f

Oxford, St John's College, MS 167*

'Syster Mare Neuel', 'Sister Tomysyn Grove', 'Brother James Stock', flyleaf

Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library, Inc. H491*

Various monograms of Joanna Sewell, James Grenehalgh, and combined JGS monogram

'Joanna Sewell', in monogram surrounded by 'Sanctus Salvator, Birgitta, Sanctus Augustinus, Maria', f. 135^v

University of Bergen, Norway