

# The Spiritual Singularity of Syon Abbey and its Sisters

Laura Roberts

With the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539, Henry VIII and his advisors eradicated nearly a millennium of monastic tradition in England. Between Saint Augustine of Canterbury's first landing on the shores of Kent in the late sixth century and the English Reformation, hundreds of religious houses of monks and nuns were established and thousands of men and women entered into the monastic life. By the time England's break with the Catholic Church was complete, only one house remained, a vestige of England's once-powerful monastic legacy. The Monastery of Saint Saviour and Saint Bridget of Syon, known as Syon Abbey, was the sole monastic foundation to survive the tumult of the English Reformation. It managed to stay intact on the continent after the Dissolution, returned to English soil during the Marian Restoration, again remained whole after a second exile across the Channel, and resettled at last in England in the nineteenth century after the Catholic Relief Act.<sup>1</sup> Before its dissolution in 2011, it stood as the only English religious community to survive in an unbroken line from the Middle Ages, having retained not only its existence but also its essential character.

Founded in 1415 by Henry V, Syon Abbey was the first and only Bridgettine foundation in England, revered for its piety almost from its inception. Saint Bridget of Sweden created her order in the fourteenth century as part of the great wave of monastic revival that occurred in the late medieval era, with the same religious fervor carrying over to the British Isles and resulting in the foundation of Syon. The abbey quickly grew to become one of the wealthiest and most prominent in the

---

<sup>1</sup> E.A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham, "Introduction," in *Syon Abbey and its Books: Reading, Writing, and Religion c. 1400-1700* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2010), 2.

kingdom, attracting widespread fame, wealth, and prestige for the community. After Henry VIII proclaimed the break with Rome and Syon was officially dissolved in 1539, the members did not disband the community but moved their entire foundation to the Low Countries, where they wandered for several years. Upon the death of Henry VIII's successor Edward VI and the Marian restoration, the Syon community returned briefly to their English home, only to be expelled yet again after Elizabeth I's ascension and final establishment of the Anglican Church. The Syon sisters then made their way to Lisbon, at the time a portion of the Spanish Empire, where they remained for the next three centuries, maintaining their identity, traditions, and spiritual mission. Upon the passage of the Catholic Relief Act in the nineteenth century, the Syon community, by that time composed solely of sisters, was able to return to its native land and continue the work of Saint Bridget on English soil.<sup>2</sup>

The question of why Syon survived when every other house did not can be grounded in the debate surrounding the nature of late medieval monasticism, especially among women. For those historians, such as David Knowles and A.G. Dickens, who see the religious landscape on the eve of the Reformation as one of decline and deterioration, Syon represents a departure from the norm, quite different from the "spectacle of an uninspired and lukewarm establishment" that was the religious culture of the time.<sup>3</sup> In these historians' discussions of the past, the sisters of Syon are exceptions to the rule, spiritual elites in contrast to their fellow nuns, who are merely surplus from the marriage market. More recently, revisionist Syon scholars like Alexandra Walsham and E.A. Jones, who discern a monastic revival in the late medieval period, have painted a portrait of Syon as "a particularly shining example of trends and tendencies from which monastic communities elsewhere were by no means wholly excluded or immune."<sup>4</sup> Eamon Duffy explicates similar patterns, proving that late medieval Catholicism was a far cry from the derelict, corrupt institution that later Protestants claimed it was.<sup>5</sup> For these historians, the Syon nuns were not unique but representative of a larger revival of monastic devotion found among many convents of the time. The question of whether English monasticism and Catholicism in general were in decline or experiencing a rebirth colors the interpretation of the history of Syon Abbey. That same

---

<sup>2</sup> All information in the preceding paragraph from Jones, 2.

<sup>3</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London, 1964), 87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

question has not, however, frequently been framed in the context of the sisters' survival after the Reformation. To be the only English house to emerge intact from centuries of religious upheaval, Syon must have possessed something unique. Though other English houses were undergoing spiritual transformations and renewals, Syon Abbey was the archetype of the great spirit of monastic reform that characterized the Late Middle Ages, particularly for nuns. Saint Bridget herself founded her order to revitalize what she saw as a deterioration of the monastic ideal among nuns, and the order was brought to England under Henry V for the same purpose.<sup>6</sup> Syon Abbey was the last significant monastic establishment before the Reformation, intended to completely revitalize the character of English monasticism for women. As such, the reformative zeal of this house fostered a unique, single-minded devotion to the order and its models of spirituality and piety. While Syon was not the sole shareholder of this reformatory spirit of the late medieval period, it was the exemplar. As such, it stood out from nearly every other English house. In examining the community's internal values, it becomes clear that these values helped Syon survive a number of external existential threats. The sisters' intense commitment to their way of life, unmatched by nearly any other religious foundation in England, enabled their survival and status as the only religious house to withstand the Reformation. Through their tumults and despite their long exile, the sisters were able to retain the structure, beliefs, and purpose of their foundation and eventually return to England, a feat that no other monastic establishment attained.

Several important characteristics unique to Syon Abbey allowed the house to weather the Reformation and return to English soil. The first was the exceptionally high level of patronage enjoyed by the Abbey, almost unheard of for a foundation of women. The next was the piously stringent standards to which the sisters were held, with the expectation that they would obey these regulations through any challenge. The final was the sisters' devotional patterns that no doubt gave them hope and strength in the midst of their struggles. Each aspect was born of the sisters' piety, whether directly or indirectly, and enabled their survival throughout the centuries. Their famed devoutness and virtue inspired their patrons, both in England and on the Continent, both aristocratic and common, to support the house throughout its long history and in its greatest time of need. Their dedication to their abbey and their way of life instilled a passion that sustained the sisters through their long exile. Such a model of spiritual devotion was to carry them through their many peregrinations. Their patterns of worship imparted to them a sense of spiritual authority that gave them the strength and fortitude to endure

---

<sup>6</sup> Dickens, *English Reformation*, 4.

many centuries of separation from their homeland. While other English houses did possess some or all of these same characteristics, the sisters of Syon possessed them in remarkable quantities, enabling their survival over all other religious houses. Such an approach to the question of Syon's survival does not incorporate the nuns' thoughts on themselves and their world, in part because very few documents penned from the sisters' own hands survive. It also leaves out almost two centuries of the sisters' story and focuses on the aspects of their lives that were already in place at the time of the Reformation, not any developments that may have arisen in exile. It does, however, take into account the sisters' way of life in the political, the everyday, and the religious spheres and answers how their actions, grounded in their special piety, allowed them to survive. While a number of external influences and events swayed the trajectory of the abbey throughout its centuries in exile, this paper will instead focus on the internal aspects of Syon that allowed it to maintain its cohesion and existence: the sisters' behaviors, beliefs, and values informed their cohesion and determination in keeping the community together, adhering to the rule of Saint Bridget, and eventually returning to their native land.

### **I – Patronage**

The high level of patronage enjoyed by the sisters of Syon Abbey and inspired by their famed, unique piety both boosted their prestige before the Dissolution and protected them during their peregrinations, thereby aiding their survival and eventual return to England. Even before the Reformation, Syon enjoyed a level of patronage almost unprecedented in all of England. Founded and endowed by Henry V as part of his project of expansion of monastic houses, the abbey received an allowance of 1,000 marks per year and lands throughout southern England, “from Kent to Saint Michael's Mount off the Cornish coast, and as far north as Lincolnshire and Lancashire.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Syon became the wealthiest nunnery and one of the richest houses for either men or women in the whole of England. Along with other Bridgettine foundations, Syon also enjoyed a reputation of strict adherence to religious life and ardent personal holiness. This exemplary behavior was viewed as being especially conducive to strengthening their prayers on behalf of individuals, families, and communities.<sup>8</sup> As such, it attracted a

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Bainbridge, “Women and the Transmission of Religious Culture: Benefactresses of Three fine Convents c. 1400-1600,” in *Birgittiana*, vol. 3, 1997, 55-76. 57.

number of wealthy and influential patrons, particularly women, who participated in an institutionalized practice of patronizing religious houses. Noblewomen such as Cicely Neville, Duchess of York and Margaret, Lady Hungerford adopted certain aspects of the Bridgettine office and elements of the Syon sisters' daily lives for their own personal use and devotion. Such women were noted for their exceptional piety and devotion to particular saints; the household of Cicely Neville contained numerous devotional works authored by or pertaining to Saint Bridget, which were read out loud nearly every day.<sup>9</sup> Well-to-do women of the middle and merchant classes acted similarly, also patterning their lives after that of Saint Bridget and the nuns of Syon and occasionally seeking refuge in the abbey's walls after the deaths of their husbands.<sup>10</sup> One such woman was Mabel Tempest, widow of a middling knight, who, upon the death of her husband, swore perpetual chastity and became a vowess at Syon. At her death, she willed a large part of her fortune to Syon, reflecting her deep spiritual commitment to the abbey.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most famous of Syon's prominent benefactresses was Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII and staunch supporter of the abbey. She felt a strong connection with the sisters and their founder, Saint Bridget, and spent much time at Syon, especially in her later life. Additionally, she made regular payments in support of the members of the abbey, as well as other enclosed monastic houses.<sup>12</sup> Such a high degree of patronage from the gentry, the aristocracy, and even the royal circle not only brought Syon a steady source of income but also gave it a prestige above nearly every other English religious house. The sisters' piety and devotion were exceptional in and of themselves, but the attention and benefaction lavished upon the house by such influential members of society gave Syon an unprecedented level of prominence.

The sisters' piety continued to inspire such a tradition of English patronage even into the community's exile during the Reformation. Throughout all their journeys—from Antwerp and Termonde in the Low Countries after their first exile, then back to England, then again to Termonde after Elizabeth I's accession, then from Zierikzee to Mishagen to Antwerp again to Michelen to Rouen and finally to Lisbon in Portugal—the sisters depended heavily upon support from local communities of English Catholic exiles.<sup>13</sup> Their constant wanderings and

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>10</sup> Jones and Walsham, *Syon Abbey and its Books*, 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Erler, "Syon's 'Special Benefactors and Friends': Some Vowed Women," in *Birgittiana*, vol 3, 1996, 209-222.

<sup>12</sup> Jones and Walsham, *Syon Abbey and its Books*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Claire Walker, "Community and Isolation: The tines of Syon in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Syon Abbey and its Books*, 157.

lack of permanent residence, along with the disappearance of the kind of institutional aristocratic support they had enjoyed in England, left the sisters destitute and wholly reliant on the support of their countrymen on the continent. Ever mindful of their long-held goal to return to England and reestablish Catholicism as the faith of the kingdom, the Bridgettine sisters of Syon, while certainly open to receiving aid from local townspeople in the countries where they wandered, “did all they could to secure patrons and support from among the expatriate English and from their homeland.”<sup>14</sup> Such support came less regularly than it had in England, but it came in the form of alms donated by men like George Gilbert, an English Catholic who visited the sisters of Syon in exile and found them in such a “great necessity” that he left 600 scudi and persuaded a friend to do the same.<sup>15</sup> That such support was forthcoming from equally destitute English Catholics in exile speaks volumes about the sisters’ continued prestige and influence. Men and women who could hardly support themselves still gave whatever they could to keep the famous house alive.

Support was not limited solely to English expatriates, however, as the sisters’ renowned holiness won them support from powerful friends throughout the Continent. The Spanish Crown was perhaps Syon’s greatest and most powerful benefactor during this period. While the visible and important position Syon enjoyed before the Reformation might have made it more vulnerable to attacks once the Dissolution occurred and the government began dismantling monasteries, it actually gave the sisters a special prestige in the international realm. Syon was so renowned among English religious houses that the Spanish, after the Dissolution, took it upon themselves to see after the survival and well being of the abbey. In fact, Spanish support of Syon was so intense that it was the Spanish ambassador to England who ensured that the sisters received safe passage out of the country after the accession of Elizabeth I, and it was the Spanish governor in the Netherlands who persuaded the crown to allow the sisters an annual payment of 1,200 florins to support their abbey.<sup>16</sup> The Spanish made it a point of their foreign policy with the newly Protestant English to continue to support Syon; if such a great, renowned English religious house came under the protection and patronage of the Spanish, they gained a valuable asset in the propaganda

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Foley (ed.), *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, 7 vol (London, 1878), iii, 691. The scudo was the papal currency up until the nineteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher de Hamel, *Syon Abbey: the Library of the time Nuns and their Peregrinations after the Reformation* (London: Roxburghe Club, 1991), 56.

and spiritual war on their heretic neighbors across the channel. Thus, the sisters enjoyed a close, singular relationship with the Spanish monarchy, which many other English religious houses in exile did not. While the Spanish had originally been benefactors of other English houses in exile, soon they came to support only the sisters of Syon as the remaining houses stayed put in the Low Countries and the tines moved to Lisbon, the heart of the Spanish empire.<sup>17</sup>

The sisters themselves knew how to manipulate this level of benefaction and admiration of their piety to their advantage. They were not passive players in the realm of political patronage but active participants, ever mindful of their goal to reestablish their community in their homeland. In their petition to the Infanta Maria and King Phillip III, the sisters made clear their intermingled political and religious ambitions. Written to the royal family at a time when the Infanta's betrothal to the Prince of Wales seemed imminent, the nuns' petition reflected both their strong spiritual longing to return to their homeland and the political acumen necessary to ensure such a move. The sisters of Syon beseeched the young princess, drawing parallels between her and her step-grandmother Mary I, calling on the princess to reestablish the convent "just as Queen Mary...resettled the convent following its exile in Flanders," and reminding her of the divine importance of her mission.<sup>18</sup> The nuns reminded the Infanta that the Lord "ordained that the Princess Mary, wife of the aforementioned famous Prince [of Wales], should resettle it a second time from the foreign kingdoms to which it had again been exiled, and has now, through the marriage of Your Highness, opened the door for our holy Catholic faith to enter England."<sup>19</sup> The nuns drew parallels between their suffering and that of the exile of the Israelites, reminding the princess that they, too "know, feel, and have experienced for more than seventy years the full hardships of this exile...[and] finally the aching loss of our native land, families and mother tongue... make evident the burdens and great difficulties we have experienced and have carried on our shoulders."<sup>20</sup> The Bridgettines emphasized the exceptional nature of their order, telling the princess that they were "unique, since not only were we the first exiles for our Holy Catholic Faith, but also the only ones, of all the orders and convents of English nuns, who have continued and persevered in this very hard exile."<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Walker, *Community and Isolation*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> de Hamel, "Petition to the Infanta Maria and King Phillip III," 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Such a message appears politically calculated. The nuns addressed Mary as though she were already Princess of Wales, calling her the “wife” and not the “betrothed” of the Prince, assigning to her a sense of authority and therefore a sense of duty to watch over their community. In this vein, they went a step further, and likened her to Queen Mary of England, both ascribing to her the power of her royal forbearer and intimating that she, too, would be queen of England one day. Both methods of addressing the princess served to make her mindful of her ancestral and royal duty to defend Catholicism and restore the sisters of Syon to their rightful place in England. The nuns also reminded the Infanta of their devotion and endurance through their hardships, making an emotional plea to the princess to preserve such a pious house so long buffeted by the storms of the Reformation. Such an approach would have both appealed to the princess’ emotional and spiritual sensibilities and reminded her of the great political advantage in supporting so famous an abbey. The nuns’ dual political and spiritual appeal to the princess underscored their singular determination to return to their homeland and reestablish their house on English shores.

They addressed her father King Phillip in a similar manner, thanking him for keeping watch over them throughout their exile, even calling him their “angelic consort and companion.”<sup>22</sup> Reminding Phillip of his past benefaction, the sisters went on to say that they could offer the king “a jewel of a much greater price and value than all the other many gifts and presents that may arrive...truly the world will be amazed to see so great a monarch giving his particular attention to helping and preserving such humble and poor foreigners” and asserted that “the prize and glory of this deed will last eternally in heaven.”<sup>23</sup> In this petition, the sisters attempted to rouse the support of King Phillip by not only praising his and his ancestors’ traditional patronage of the house but promising him the favor of God Himself should the king aid the sisters in their quest to return home. Well aware of the political value of their house and support of it, the sisters sought to rally the King of Spain to their cause, calling not only upon his past support of Syon but also on the state of his very soul. They recognized the esteem bestowed upon their house and their own reputation for piety and manipulated it to their advantage, allowing them to survive the numerous upheavals of their long exile. They did not dissolve and disband like so many other religious houses in exile, but instead continued their traditions and preserved their hope of restoring Catholicism in their homeland.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 29.



## II – Daily Patterns of Life

The same piety and spiritual zeal that inspired patrons across Europe also manifested itself in the strict behavioral standards adhered to by the sisters of Syon and in their deep attachment to their way of life that these standards produced. Daily life at Syon Abbey consisted of rules and regulations much more stringent than those of its contemporaries, inspiring a commitment to the religious life unmatched by nearly any other religious house of the time. Nuns in England had been expected to remain in strict enclosure since the High Middle Ages, although this requirement was met with much resistance and was seldom followed with any kind of strict observance. In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII, in response to allegations of unchaste behavior from many nuns, issued the papal decree *Periculoso*, which required that all nuns of any and every order be entirely enclosed within their cloisters, “that so altogether withdrawn from public and mundane sights they may serve God more freely and, all opportunity for wantonness being removed, they may more diligently preserve for Him in all holiness their souls and their bodies.”<sup>24</sup> Such efforts at enclosure of monastic women continued right up until the Dissolution, but many nuns resisted these attempts from their inception.

In the year *Periculoso* was first issued, bishops throughout England and Europe were urged to enforce it in their dioceses, with varying degrees of success. English nuns and their sisters on the Continent vehemently opposed any attempts at cloistering, with one notable example being the Benedictine priory of Markyate in the diocese of Lincoln. When Bishop Dalderby of Lincoln came to Markyate in 1298 to explain “in the vulgar tongue” the *Periculoso*, he was quickly ushered out of the house by an angry abbess and several nuns, who “hurled the said statute at his back and over his head...following the bishop to the outer gate of the house and declaring unanimously that they were not content in any way to observe such a statute.”<sup>25</sup> Clearly, the nuns of Markyate were used to a certain degree of freedom in their movements and were most reluctant to adopt any decree that would limit this liberty. Such recalcitrance was common throughout the High and Late Middle Ages in England, with numerous bishoprics’ registers recording incidents of nuns breaking enclosure rules “by attending funerals, weddings, and feastings, going on pilgrimages, becoming godmothers and attending

---

<sup>24</sup> “Periculoso,” in Paul Lee, *Nunneries, Learning, and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society: The Dominican Priory of Dartford* (York: York Medieval Press, 2003), 90.

<sup>25</sup> “Dalderby’s Register,” in Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries: C. 1275 to 1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 351.

baptisms, visiting family and friends, helping out at busy times on home farms, and slipping out to take walks.”<sup>26</sup> Such actions were innocuous and reflective of many nuns’ devotion to their community, although there were more scandalous transgressions as well. Indeed, one prioress at Romsey Abbey complained in 1492 that many of her sisters “continually went into the town without taking leave, sometimes frequenting taverns.”<sup>27</sup> Faced with such obstinacy, bishops throughout England relaxed the standards of the *Periculoso*, “directing their efforts towards regulating the conditions under which nuns left their convents” rather than trying to enforce keeping them within the walls of their cloisters.<sup>28</sup> One contemporary noted such lax enforcement, lamenting that “these statutes are a dead letter or are ill-kept at best” and recording the nuns’ extreme reluctance to abide by “these hard and intolerable restrictions.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, until the sixteenth century, most English nuns were allowed a certain degree of freedom and enjoyed frequent opportunities to leave their convent walls, which occasionally resulted in a lack of stringent discipline and rigid commitment to monastic life.

Syon Abbey suffered none of these scandals. Bridget of Sweden founded her order as a means of combatting the lax religious observance prevalent in many houses of her day, and Henry V founded Syon Abbey in England as a “strictly enclosed house” designed to attract only the most devout women who “sought a stricter observance” than was practiced in many other monastic houses.<sup>30</sup> Upon entering the convent, a novice sister, who had to be at least eighteen years of age (unlike many other foundations, which had no age requirement) and therefore capable of deciding to take the veil of her own accord, was required to “remain one year before she receive[d] the habit” in order to ensure her total devotion to God and to the Bridgettine Order.<sup>31</sup> To further confirm a novice’s spiritual dedication, at her acceptance into the order, the “Lady Abbess” was required to “examine her, if she desires this solely for the love of God” and to tell her of the austerities and hardness of the religious life, that is to say, contempt of the world, forgetting of father and mother and all worldly friendship as far as the Rule and the Church

---

<sup>26</sup> Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>28</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries: C. 1275 to 1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 354.

<sup>29</sup> “John of Ayton,” in *Medieval English Nunneries*, 354.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, *Nunneries, Learning, and Spirituality*, 91.

<sup>31</sup> *The additions of the Monastery of Saint Saviour and St. Bridget of Syon: printed from the mss. of the XVth century, in the library of the British Museum and the library of St. Paul's Cathedral for the same monastery of Syon* (1912) from the University of Toronto online archives, 87.

determineth, much fasting, early risings, long Services in Choir, daily labour, strict silence, lowest place, hard corrections of Superiors, prompt obedience, giving up of her own will, patience in adversities, and many other things, which may be lightly suffered for a while, but to continue therein for the term of life is very hard.<sup>32</sup>

From this stipulation for selection of potential sisters, it is evident that the women of Syon would not be the kind of nuns who left the cloister to help with the harvest or to frequent taverns. Admission to the Bridgettine Order and Syon Abbey required a spiritual discipline and rigor not found in most other English religious houses of the day. They came in to the religious life knowing full well the self-control it demanded and were expected to adhere to it strenuously, throughout the whole of their lives. They were to forget and turn away from all remnants of their worldly life, from their friends to their homes to their own fathers and mothers. If a sister wished to see her friends and family, she could not go to them, but only they to her, and this wish would not be “lightly granted” by the abbess “but seldom in the year” and only if the sister would swear to behave herself “godly and religiously in countenance, in speech and in all [her] actions.”<sup>33</sup> Life was to be lived in the abbey and devoted to the glory of God and His mother, not to be interrupted for any worldly concerns such as “slipping out to take walks”, and certainly not by any breaches of chastity. Their old life was to be as good as dead to them; their new one commanded strict obedience. Spirituality and community were the core and sole focuses of the sisters’ lives.

Within this insular world, their behavior was strictly regulated. To avoid the disgrace of scandal associated, truly or falsely, with many communities of religious women, the brothers and sisters of Syon were strictly segregated. The only time the two sexes interacted was in the case of priests administering sacraments to the sisters; otherwise, the brothers and sisters never met. The sisters lived in one wing of the abbey, brothers in another. They ate their meals at separate times. During services, sisters were seated in the upper levels of the chapel, brothers in the lower, so that they never saw each other but only heard each other’s singing.<sup>34</sup> This absolute segregation ensured that the men and women of Syon would never meet, never interact, and never have any opportunity to cause even a rumor of disgrace. In addition, sisters were expected “to moderate all the bodily behavior in such wise that they never exceed the bonds of honesty, neither in laughing, standing, sitting, nor going.”<sup>35</sup> In walking,

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> de Hamel, *Syon Abbey*, 52.

<sup>35</sup> *The Additions*, 29.

they were to “behave them so regularly and honestly that they go no more on the right side than on the left—not too fast, nor too slow...without jolting and moving of the shoulders...nor looking about slyly, nor hold too upright the head...and go forth simply, showing over all the signs of meekness.”<sup>36</sup> In all aspects of their behavior, the sisters were regulated and expected to carry out their vows of chastity, humility, and obedience. Even their walk was meant to proclaim their humble station and their devotion to the cause of Christ, for “by the outward bodily meaning is oft known the inward disposition of the soul.”<sup>37</sup> These intensive instructions, which applied to even the most basic and quotidian aspects of life, were meant to keep the sisters ever mindful and ever contemplative of their mission to serve God and the Virgin Mary and to reinforce their obedience to this commitment.

The rigorous specifications for the kind of women Syon wanted, the strictly enforced enclosure, and thorough, austere expectations of behavior all enhanced the singular, devout, and introspective piety of the sisters. Syon—its rules, its walls, its services—was their entire world. Nothing of the secular was meant to enter their hearts, their bodies, or their cloisters. The whole of their lives was totally governed by the abbey’s rules and committed to the service of God and of the Virgin Mary. The strictness of daily life at Syon Abbey ensured that no worldly tumult could assail the sisters’ devotion and piety. It was the sisters’ total commitment to their way of life before the Reformation that translated also into their devotion to the perpetuation of their house’s foundation and values through the upheaval of their exile.

### **III – Patterns of Devotion**

This same ardent piety was echoed in the sisters’ observance of the daily office and in the devotion to their spiritual way of life that this observance inspired. The daily office<sup>38</sup> was of paramount importance to monastic life in medieval Christianity. The practice of saying the hours—Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline—as well as mass on Sundays formed the backbone of the daily life of monks and nuns across Europe. Eight times a day, a monastic community would gather to recite psalms and chants and liturgical readings in the service of their dedication to God. Such practices were codified in the Roman Rite, the established Catholic method of observance of the hours, but many

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>38</sup> The daily office was also referred to as the divine office, the divine hours, or the daily hours.

derivations existed among various monastic houses. As the observance of the daily office was so paramount in shaping the patterns of spiritual worship among monastic communities, the particular rite used by a house would have tremendous bearing on the character of its religious devotion. In England, one of the most popular variants was the Sarum Rite, which first arose in the eleventh century and remained prominent until the English Reformation and the institution of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.<sup>39</sup> Though the practice of the Sarum Rite dominated the observance of the divine hours in most of the British Isles, it did not have a total monopoly. The sisters of Syon Abbey had their own unique liturgy, called the *Myroure of Our Ladye*, written specifically for the time order and adapted for the community in England. Though the author of the *Myroure* remains anonymous, the work is traditionally attributed to Thomas Gascoigne, an Oxford cleric with close ties to Syon Abbey.<sup>40</sup> In their observance of the daily office, the nuns of Syon gave primary focus to the Virgin Mary and thus centered their entire spiritual practice on her. The prominence of the mother of God in the *Myroure* transcended any Marian emphasis found in the Sarum Rite. Thus, the sisters at Syon had possibly a greater daily devotion to the Virgin than any other house in the British Isles. This unique, personal attachment and dedication to Mary gave the sisters a potent, female spiritual “role model” in the figure of the Virgin and gave rise to an extremely ardent piety and sense of female religious authority found nowhere else in England.

The most common devotional practice in England on the eve of the Reformation was the Sarum Rite, which was a variant on the general Roman Catholic rite of ordering the daily offices and masses.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the brothers of Syon Abbey followed the Sarum Rite in their observance of the divine hours and mass. In the Sarum Rite, Mary was given some degree of prominence in the “Memorial of Saint Mary,” which was repeated in multiple offices and masses throughout the course of the liturgical week and year. The Memorial praises Mary for her “intercession” and thanks God for “bestowing upon mankind the rewards of eternal salvation” through her “fruitful virginity.”<sup>42</sup> As the Memorial was recited so many times in the observance of the divine

---

<sup>39</sup> F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingston, “Salisbury,” in *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1446-1447.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy Bradley Warren, *The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350-1700* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 45.

<sup>41</sup> de Hamel, *Syon Abbey*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> The Gregorian Institute of Canada, trans. *The Sarum Rite*, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~renwick/sarum-chant-annex.htm>, 443.

office and in the masses, the Sarum Rite clearly assigned a great deal of importance to the Virgin and her role as Christ's mother. It does not, however, have as its primary focus the worship and praise of Mary, as the rite followed by the sisters of Syon does. In it, Mary was a background figure, a vehicle for God's saving work in the world, and not an agent in her own right. Within the observance of the Sarum Rite, she was emphasized and given attention only in a very limited scope.

For the sisters of Syon, however, the entirety of their spiritual path was centered on the Virgin Mary. The mother of God was absolutely paramount to the nuns' practice of their faith. The whole of their liturgy was dedicated to praising Mary, and the whole of their earthly existence was meant to model hers. The *Myroure* emphasized this special attachment of the women of Syon to the Queen of Heaven, saying "the doughtres of Syon haue sene hyr (that is to say oure lady) and they haue shewed her mooste blessyd."<sup>43</sup> The sisters were favored enough to have beheld the Virgin Mary and were therefore called to bear witness to her sanctity and devote their earthly lives to her. The *Myroure* intended to instruct them in the ways of this devotion and how best to dedicate themselves entirely to the praise and service of the Virgin. All of the hours of the daily service were devoted to her, for "yt is reasonable that vii tymes eche day she be worshyped and praysed, and our lorde god for her, of all hys chirche, and more specyally of you that ar so specyally callyd to be her maydens and dayly to synge and to say her holy seruice."<sup>44</sup> The sisters were meant to dedicate the divine hours, usually devoted to the worship and remembrance of Christ, principally to His mother. As they were "specially called," the nuns of Syon were to devote one of the most essential parts of monastic life, the saying of the divine hours, to Mary above all other saints and above even Christ. All their days were to be spent in her service, and all their lives were meant to glorify her.

The *Myroure* emphasized the Virgin's piety as the chief aspect of what the sisters ought to praise her for. As she was the mother of God, Mary possessed a special holiness and sanctity that the sisters, her own "maydens," were intended to laud and emulate.<sup>45</sup> According to the *Myroure*, Mary was the most pious and blessed human being, man or woman, to have ever lived, one who was "euer gouerned after his [God's] commaundments and mekely obeyed in all thunges to his woly worde

---

<sup>43</sup> Author Unknown (possibly Thomas Gascoigne), *The Myroure of Our Ladye*, ed. John Henry Blunt, (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1873), 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

and therby she deserued to be the mother of god.”<sup>46</sup> Her obedience to God was so perfect and her piety so devout that she was set above all other people as the mother of Christ.

This extraordinary obedience, however, was not her sole virtue. Mary's piety and devotion to God extended to every aspect of her life, making her second only to Christ in holiness. The *Myroure* emphasized these myriad virtues of Mary, saying “there was neuer saynte in erthe ne aungel in heuenthat was or ys so full of vertues and graces, but that our lady had and hathe them al in more fulnesse and perfeccyon then they.”<sup>47</sup> Mary was thus given primacy over the entire communion of saints and the whole host of heaven for her incredible piety and virtue. She was above all the apostles and angels, even above saints like Peter, the spiritual founder of the Catholic Church, and Michael, the chief archangel. These virtues remained unchanged and Mary's piety unmoved even during all her earthly trials. Through the sorrowful passion and death of her Son, “the thornes of trybulacions pricked her harte nuer so moche, yet they chaunged not her wyl.”<sup>48</sup> Not only did Mary exemplify perfect virtue and obedience to God, she did so even under the most trying circumstances a person could possibly endure. So extraordinary was her reverence and so exalted was she that “god hymselfe louyth her more then he loueth all creatures that euer were or euer shall be in the same ages.”<sup>49</sup>

This special piety of Mary that the sisters of Syon so revered not only gave her favor with God but a real power and influence over creation and humanity. The *Myroure* emphasized that Mary's devotion was not passive, but active. Just as she “carried and bare god and man in one persone, in her wombe, and in her blessyd arms, she caryeth synners frome synne to grace.”<sup>50</sup> In the religious paradigm espoused by the *Myroure*, Mary was no sideline figure, but pivotal in the very act of salvation itself. For Mary's exceptional piety, the *Myroure* said Christ gave Mary nearly equal power with himself:

“This creature of mankynde my mooste holy mother in maner delyueryd, whan she left all her wyll in to my hands, and wolde suffer all trybulacion that soulless might be saued...Therefore for this wyl I god and the endeles sonne of god was made man in the virgin, whose harte was as myne hart. And therefore I may well say that my mother and I

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 110-110.

haue saued man, as yt had be with one hart I sufferynge in harte and body, and she in sorrow of harte and in loue.”<sup>51</sup>

In this view of Mary, she was set up as an equal partner in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection; it was not only Jesus who bore “all tribulation” for the salvation of mankind, but also Mary, “suffering in sorrow of heart and in love.” In the language of the *Myroure*, it was both Christ and Mary who “have saved man.” Such an understanding of the Virgin gave her a remarkable authority in the Church and in the lives of human beings. Through her piety, she became almost a second deity, with the power to deliver humanity from sin. Mary had a tremendous amount of power for the sisters of Syon, totally unseen in the Sarum Breviary and other spiritual works, and assumed an authority on par with that of God Himself.

With this piety and power of Mary detailed in the *Myroure*, the women of Syon were meant to emulate the Queen of Heaven in all their earthly doings. In fact, the *Myroure* was so named “that ye [the sisters] shulde se her therin as in a myroure, and so be styred the more deuoutly to prayse her, and to knowe where ye fayle in her prayssinges, and to amende: tyll he may come there ye may se her face to face wythouten eny myroure.”<sup>52</sup> In their service of the Virgin, the nuns of Syon were to model their lives after that of Mary and to come nearer and nearer to her in doing so, that they might see her “face to face.” Mary was meant to be the “mirror” through which they saw their lives, their faith, and themselves. They were to assume her piety, to exemplify her virtues, and to bear their crosses as she bore hers. In the abbey community, modeled after the community of disciples in the New Testament, the women of Syon were meant to exercise symbolically the spiritual authority that Mary held over all of Creation.<sup>53</sup> The unparalleled importance given to Mary in the *Myroure* gave the women of Syon an unprecedented model of female spirituality, one that called for an absolute devotion to the Virgin and to the faith.

With this example of Mary, the most important woman in the Christian faith, as their model, the Bridgettine sisters were expected to likewise exercise their own religious power and become more like the female Head of the Church. Thus Bridgettine nuns were not submissive but possessed their own spiritual direction and identity. The *Myroure* provided women with spirituality on their own terms, written by a woman, modeled on a woman, and carried out by women. As the only nuns in England who practiced the devotions of the *Myroure* and thus

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>53</sup> de Hamel, *Syon Abbey*, 52.



some of the only ones with this concept of female religious authority, the sisters of Syon developed a strong sense of agency in their spiritual paths. They were the ones responsible for defining and practicing their own religious way of life, expected to emulate their whole lives after that of the most powerful, pious, and important women in the Christian tradition. The sisters were incredibly personally attached to Mary—they were “specially called to be her maidens”—and the remarkable model that Mary provided them with surely would have inspired them to follow zealously in the path of their Lady. Such a faith, so personal and all-consuming, laid the foundations for the beliefs and devotions that would help sustain the community during the early years of its exile and inform its actions and goals during the centuries of its exile.

### **Conclusion**

In examining the patterns of political patronage, daily life, expectations of monastic life, and spiritual devotion of the sisters of Syon Abbey, a portrait of an intensely spiritual, intensely devoted, intensely powerful house emerges. The nuns of Syon occupied a unique place in the world of English monasticism in numerous ways. Founded with the intention of reviving the monastic culture of late medieval England and designed to attract only the most pious of women, Syon enjoyed from its birth and throughout its exile a high level of patronage, on both the local and international stage. Such patronage was inspired in part by the political value that Syon symbolized and in part by the famed piety and devotion of the sisters themselves. Such piety was expressed and reinforced by the sisters' daily lives and the expectations of behavior within the convent walls, the pattern on which they modeled their monastic lives, and the nature of their spiritual devotion. At a time when most other English nuns interacted intensely with the secular community and outside world, the sisters of Syon were strictly enclosed, knowing only the walls of their cloister, inspiring a fervent dedication to their way of life. This way of life was laid down in the principles of the fine Rule of Saint Saviour, which stipulated that the women of Syon were to devote their lives to and model their behavior on the example of the Virgin Mary, the most pious and important woman in all of Christianity. Their practice of spiritual devotion as expressed in the *Myroure of Oure Ladye* reinforced this Marian emphasis, reminding the sisters of their dedication to the Queen of Heaven and the expectation that they come to approximate her surpassing piety, holiness, and spiritual authority. The model of Marian devotion contained in the *Myroure of Oure Ladye* and the Rule of Saint Saviour not only augmented the piety and devotion of the sisters of Syon but also gave them a potent feminine model of spiritual dedication at a time when most other religious women lacked

such a powerful example. Such a particularity is especially notable when remembering that the brothers of Syon eventually died out and only the sisters remained to carry on the community.

This combination of political influence, strict regulations of behavior, fervent and personal monastic way of life, and pious patterns of spiritual devotion all contributed to the singularity of Syon Abbey and the sisters' tenacity in weathering the storms of the Reformation and centuries of exile. As the exemplar of the wave of reform characteristic of the late medieval period, the sisters of Syon embodied the highest ideals of monasticism on the eve of the Reformation. While every other English religious order was dissolved and dispelled by the Reformation, only the sisters of Syon survived and preserved the spiritual way of life to which they were so fervently committed. This commitment ensured the continuation of their existence throughout the tumult of the Reformation and later carried them back to England, where they survived up until 2011 and became the only English religious house to have survived five centuries of religious change.

## Bibliography

- Author Unknown (possibly Thomas Gascoigne). *The Myroure of Our Ladye*. Edited by John Henry Blunt. London: N. Trübner & Co. 1873.
- Bainbridge, Virginia R. "Women and the Transmission of Religious Culture: Benefactresses of Three fine Convents c. 1400-1600." *Birgittiana* 3 (1997): 55-76.
- Cross, F.L. and E.A. Livingston. *Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- de Hamel, Christopher. *Syon Abbey: the Library of the fine Nuns and Their Peregrinations After the Reformation*. London: Roxburghe Club, 1991.
- Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Erler, Mary. "Syon's 'Special Benefactors and Friends:' Some Vowed Women." *Birgittiana* 3 (1996): 209-222.
- Foley, Henry, ed. *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*. 7 vol. London, 1878.
- Foxe, Richard. *Rule of Saint Benedict*. 1517. College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, 2014. <http://www.osb.org>.
- Gregorian Institute of Canada, trans. *The Sarum Rite*. McMaster University, 2013  
<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~renwick/sarum-chant-annex.htm>.
- Jones, E.A. and Alexandra Walsham. *Syon Abbey and its books: Reading, Writing and Religion, c.1400-1700*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, United Kingdom: Boydell Press, 2010.
- Lee, Paul. *Nunneries, Learning, and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society: The Dominican Priory of Dartford*. York: York Medieval Press, 2003.
- Power, Eileen. *Medieval English Nunneries: C. 1275 to 1535*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Rule of Our Most Holy Saviour: And the additions of the Monastery of Saint Saviour and St. Bridget of Syon: printed from the mss. of the XVth century, in the library of the British Museum and the library of St. Paul's Cathedral for the same monastery of Syon*. 1912. University of Toronto Online Archives, 2013.  
<https://archive.org/details/ruleofourmosthol00briduoft>.
- Warren, Nancy Bradley. *The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350-1700*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.