



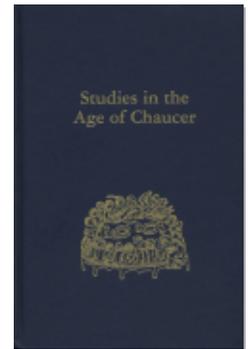
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Canon, Anon., or a Nun? Queering the Canon with Medieval Devotional Prose

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I. Restoring Devotional Prose to the Medieval Canon

MOST MEDIEVALISTS WOULD AGREE that the modern canon of medieval literature does not perfectly align with the medieval canon of medieval literature—and nor should it. Today’s canon reflects current tastes and teaching needs; inherited prejudices and predilections; and, as Thomas Prendergast writes, remains “somewhat irrational,” with a “kind of magical quality.”¹ Of course, the medieval canon of Middle English literature was also shaped by its audiences’ own tastes, but by another priority as well: spiritual self-help. We might discern the priority of saving one’s soul in a kind of reconstructed medieval “canon,” based on the greatest number of surviving manuscripts. These texts likely constituted the most popular—or we might say canonical—vernacular works in late-medieval England:

1. Wycliffite Bible (c. 250 surviving manuscripts);
2. *Brut* chronicle (c. 181);
3. *Prick of Conscience* (c. 130);
4. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (c. 81);
5. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* (c. 63);
6. Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (c. 61);
7. William Langland, *Piers Plowman* (c. 54);

¹Thomas A. Prendergast, “Canon Formation,” in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 239–51 (239).

8. *Pore Caitif* (c. 54, full text and fragments);
9. Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection* (c. 50).²

Compare that list to the Middle English contents of Volume 1 (supplemented with a few titles from the more extensive Volume A, *The Middle Ages*) of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Major Authors*—the most frequently used anthology today, and thus representative of the canon at least in terms of teaching, if not scholarship:

1. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*;
2. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*;
3. Gower, *Confessio Amantis* (only Volume A);
4. Thomas Hoccleve, *My Complainte* (only Volume A);
5. Langland, *Piers Plowman* (only Volume A);
6. Julian of Norwich, *Book of Showings*;
7. *The Book of Margery Kempe*;
8. Wakefield Second Shepherd's Play;
9. Thomas Malory, *Morte Darthur*.³

Between the two lists there are only three overlaps: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and Langland's *Piers Plowman*. The remaining texts in the first list vary, from receiving some limited scholarly and classroom attention, to receiving barely any focus at all, as with the neglected *Prick of Conscience* (ironically the most well attested Middle English poem). While the *Brut* chronicle satisfied a medieval desire for history, the other popular works all reflect a widespread demand for reading that could help accomplish the specific purpose of saving souls. The vernacular Wycliffite Bible, the *Prick of Conscience*, Love's *Mirror*, and Hilton's *Scale* (as well as *Piers Plowman*) either educate the reader on Christian doctrine and story; form their daily life as an observant Christian; or guide their inner devotions, bringing them closer to God. The end goal of all these functions was, ultimately, the most efficient entrance

²Based largely on Michael Sargent, "What Do the Numbers Mean? A Textual Critic's Observations on some Patterns of Middle English Manuscript Transmission," in *Design and Distribution of Late Medieval Manuscripts in England*, ed. Margaret Connolly and Linne R. Mooney (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), 205–44 (206).

³Stephen Greenblatt, gen. ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Major Authors*, 9th ed., 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

of the reader's soul into heaven—though a moral society was of course a beneficial side effect.

In fact, devotional practice drove the production and consumption of a vast variety of Middle English texts that survive in fewer numbers than those in the list above. Beyond the works by “major” known writers such as Love, Hilton, Richard Rolle, and the *Cloud*-author, dozens of other “minor” devotional works include many texts called compilations, where “extracts from a source or sources are woven together into a text which is presented as a single, distinct work,” such as *Pore Caitif*, *A Talkyng of the Love of God*, *Disce mori*, *The Chastising of God's Children*, *A Mirror to Devout People*, and *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, among many others.⁴ When taken together, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century devotional prose constitutes a mammoth genre whose modern marginality stands in stark contrast to its medieval popularity. Even before much of the recent work that has expanded our knowledge of the genre over the past few decades, W. A. Pantin could confidently state in 1955 that

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this vast sea of minor religious literature in the religious history of fourteenth-century England, for it means that the great spiritual writers like Rolle and Hilton did not stand alone in a vacuum, but had numberless followers and imitators. Nothing could illustrate better the thoroughness with which the piety of the age had seeped throughout society.⁵

Devotional prose was consistently in high demand from nearly all strata of readers for the entire Middle English period. Though devotional works usually gained a broader audience later on, they were often composed by male clerics specifically for women readers, whether anchoresses, nuns, or laywomen. For this reason the genre strongly reflects the undervalued role that women's literary culture has played in the formation of the medieval canon. Examining the composition, structure, and transmission of devotional prose recuperates important information about how women shaped premodern literature.

⁴Elisabeth Dutton, *Julian of Norwich: The Influence of Late-Medieval Devotional Compilations* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 3. For a full list and manuscript sources, see P. S. Jolliffe, *A Check-List of Middle English Prose Writings of Spiritual Guidance* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974).

⁵W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (1955; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 247–48.

One of the genre's constants is its focus on the process of stirring up desire for the divine and shaping the self in Christ's image through meditation and contemplation, sometimes combined with catechetical and penitential emphases. Whether imaginatively participating in the events of Christ's life, or practicing affective prayer, these readers learn how to feel through reflecting on their own present or the biblical past. The other constant of the genre is its inconstancy: in many cases, its texts have one or more base texts; they interpolate multiple other texts; they freely interweave translations and original material; they experiment with narrative structure, voice, language, and style. Their authors (or compilers, or creators) might be known, or misattributed, or most often intentionally unknown. Once in circulation devotional works seem to lend themselves to being dramatically revised and recombined to suit different audiences, adapted and excerpted by other scribes just as they are made of adapted and excerpted texts themselves, such that pinning down a "best" text contradicts their intrinsically Promethean nature. Such flexibility made devotional prose a hardy kind of literature with thousands of survivals. Yet devotional prose as a genre, and specifically devotional compilations, are almost entirely unrepresented in today's teaching anthologies; and outside a small group of specialists, it is all too often dismissed by medieval scholars as derivative or lacking prestige, "as aggressively didactic, digressive, and repetitious, barely worthy of literary analysis,"⁶ and full of pervasive misogyny. Not to mention that our colleagues working on other periods nod in recognition at Chaucer's name but might not even regard such religious texts as "real literature."

If given some serious attention, however, devotional literature shows itself to be deserving of literary analysis, and indeed a crucial piece of the puzzle of medieval English literature and culture. This has been proven by the important research in the field in recent decades by scholars such as those in this colloquium, and others such as Elizabeth Robertson, Anne Clark Bartlett, Vincent Gillespie, Ian Johnson, and Michael Sargent. But has this new knowledge about devotional prose and its exposure actually shifted how the broader discipline considers the medieval canon and its subjectivities? Has devotional prose been a part of the discussions about canon we have had, and still need to have? For the very reasons that

⁶As Anne Clark Bartlett laments about others' devaluations, in *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1.

some scholars shy away from the genre, I would argue that we need devotional prose, with its potential to challenge the hegemony of the canon, to expose its limitations, to diversify its conceptions of authorship, to broaden its engagement with gender—in other words, we need devotional prose to queer the modern canon. What would happen if we infiltrated the literary canon with a queer genre that brings into question what it means to be a literary text? Here “queer” denotes, in David Halperin’s words, “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant . . . it demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.”⁷ The canon is nothing if not the legitimate and the normative. The features of devotional prose as a genre—the instability of versions, the capaciousness of topic, the blurred boundaries between sources, the spiritual touching between narrator and reader—all are more queer than anything else, suggesting that perhaps queering the canon means becoming aware of the way that texts sometimes don’t act straight and tidy. I propose that devotional prose poses an overlapping queer and feminist resistance to conventional ideas of canonicity, and thus its inclusion in the canon can help to diffuse the canon’s heteronormative rigidity. For my purposes its queer resistance lies in shifting from a patriarchal canon to one that acknowledges other subjectivities, and in representing non-normative authorial and narrative strategies that have a queer power to upend expectations of literary form, and to break down the tyranny of single authorship. Its feminist resistance lies in its representation of an important but often voiceless readership—enclosed religious women—and how interweaving texts by visionary women releases a dialogic power that speaks to those female readers.

In many ways my idea that devotional prose could do important queering work as part of the canon operates in parallel to Tison Pugh’s views in his 2004 book *Queering Medieval Genres*. His use of the term “queer” demonstrates how his “primary concern is to deconstruct heteronormative bias and patriarchal privilege within genres rather than pointing to a latent homosexuality within the narratives.”⁸ I wish to take this approach up a level, to the function of certain genres within a broader canon of English literature. If we cannot do away with the canon, we do need a genre within it that points reflexively back to the

⁷David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62, as quoted in Karl Whittington, “Queer,” *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 157–68 (157).

⁸Tison Pugh, *Queering Medieval Genres* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 6.

canon's own patriarchal privilege, that sheds light on its biases both in terms of gender and of genre. Though he does not discuss the canon, Pugh links such a deconstructive power back to the queer genre's effect on its readers:

[T]he concept of queering genres allows us to examine the ways in which the queer is figured not merely as the presence of the homosexual within a traditional genre but also as a strategy of destabilizing the audience's own sense of heteronormative privilege. A queering genre represents an active, volitional tactic that alludes to the queer as a means of resisting, if not subverting, both generic form and the audience's heteronormatively inscribed identity.⁹

Devotional prose, as I will show, subverts many of the defining features of genre itself that help to neatly organize the modern canon: single "major" authors, monologic narratives, originality or at least novelty, coherence to parameters of literary form. Devotional prose certainly has some formal generic characteristics, but they are characteristics that contradict everything that defines every other genre represented in the canon—as a genre it breaks down how we think that literary genres should work. As Karl Whittington phrases it, "queer is about breaking down historical and academic binaries."¹⁰ Bringing devotional prose out of the archive and into the canon helps to break down the canon–non-canon academic binary. That phrasing also helps us imagine the connection between a genre's power to subvert fixed generic form (a kind of academic binary) and its power to subvert the rigid formation of readers' identities by oppressive patriarchal social structures (a historical binary)—because what I see devotional prose doing with its multivocalic, author-fluid tendencies is to complicate readerly subjectivities, both medieval and modern. "Queering genres, as a matter of praxis, involves destabilizing the audience's typical expectations with the purpose of subverting subject positions," Pugh posits, and if we think of that destabilization as applying to today's readers of the canon as much as to medieval readers, then we realize the full impact of devotional prose as a genre that can queer the canon.¹¹

⁹Ibid., 9.

¹⁰Whittington, "Queer," 165.

¹¹Pugh, *Queering Medieval Genres*, 6.

II. Queering Authorship

Returning to the contents of the Norton *Major Authors* anthology, we can see that a majority of the works have named, known authors, as the anthology's title would suggest. Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve, Langland, Malory, Julian: these are vivid, historical personages whose identities can shape the way we interpret their texts, should we choose that kind of biographical approach. *Sir Gawain*, the lyrics, and the drama are anonymous, but most scholars would argue for (and most students assume) authorship by a single person (whether male or female). And while all these texts certainly have their allusions to past textual traditions, or adapt sources to different degrees, they do not explicitly base their function as literary texts on problematizing the self-evidence of their own authorship by a single person.

Devotional prose works, on the other hand, do. These authorial parameters are radically challenged by the complex nature of authorship for devotional texts, especially compilations. First of all, their anonymity is not happenstance, or even an unfortunate loss, but is a central aspect shaping the entire genre. Vincent Gillespie articulates this unique situation: "Anonymity is the norm and the condition of late medieval English devotional writing. It is a state of mind shared between author and audience, a reflex of the humility and meekness that such writing sought to encourage and develop in the minds of its readers."¹² Even if the original immediate audience knew and took the identity of the author for granted, "once such texts find a wider readership, either by transmission of the whole work or through copying of extracts, the anonymity changes from a gestural modesty to a more substantial authorial absence."¹³ Thus the anonymity is not a vacuum but a kind of meaningful absent presence, where the facelessness behind the narrative voice encourages the reader both to imagine the speaker as a familiar pastoral figure, and simultaneously to inhabit the "I" subject-position themselves, as in the Psalms.

Another of the benefits of this kind of anonymity is the queering of the author's gender. Of course the default assumption is a male cleric,

¹²Vincent Gillespie, "Anonymous Devotional Writings," in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 127–49 (127).

¹³Ibid.

and that is probably correct in most cases. And of course such an assumption masks the possibility of female authorship—in any genre, as many scholars have discussed. “The politics concerning the anonymity of medieval texts have become increasingly important to the project of medieval feminist scholarship in its attempts to recover—at least as much is possible—the traces of female subjectivity within a culture where both subjectivity and creativity were deemed definitively male,” Liz Herbert McAvoy explains.¹⁴ We have proven examples of devotional texts by women, such as the anonymous *Feitis and Passion of Oure Lord*.¹⁵ But I think we could also interpret the lack of gendered authorial markers in late medieval devotional texts as a strategic avoidance, so that such purposeful ambiguity gives the texts a kind of transgendered potential, or to be *simultaneously* male- and female-authored. Queering the unknowable author plays with the projected gender assumptions of each particular reader, allowing the text to flex to the reader’s desire for a man or woman behind the quill. The anonymous author, then, unconstrained by the insecurities of proving a male, authoritative, clerical provenance, can even encourage the reader to view the practicing devotional subject-position as female. This resembles what McAvoy identifies in the thirteenth-century anchoritic text *The Wooing of Our Lord*, where the text is “promoting a female subject-position . . . offered as a model for affective spirituality” that acknowledges “the advantages of a female perspective on matters divine.”¹⁶ In other words, whether the author is actually a man or a woman, the text is freed up to facilitate the reader’s *feeling* like a woman, which in this period was in many ways the privileged position of affective meditation, the subject-position best able to perform devout compassion—an emotion “insistently gendered as feminine,” according to Sarah McNamer’s argument.¹⁷ We might align that devotional construct with one of the ways that queering genres function, as Pugh describes: “The authorial process of queering genres depends upon the shock of narrative, its ability to jolt audiences into positions

¹⁴Liz Herbert McAvoy, “Anonymous Texts,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 700–1500*, Vol. 1, ed. McAvoy and Diane Watt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 160–68 (160). See also the essay by Michelle Sauer, “Devotional Literature,” in the same volume, 103–11.

¹⁵McAvoy, “Anonymous Texts,” 165.

¹⁶Ibid., 164.

¹⁷Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 3.

unanticipated, unexpected, and perhaps undesired.”¹⁸ Reading like a woman could certainly be unexpected, perhaps undesired, but for the devotional reader this new position could bring great spiritual benefits.

By including such a richly gender-ambiguous text in the canon we are forced to reckon with our own desire (or, our internalization of the canon’s desire) to fix authorship as a single person with a single gender. Devotional prose prevents the author-figure from functioning monolithically. It can reset our lax suppositions that the author is even knowable or wants to be knowable. As a genre, devotional prose evokes in several ways the intricate collaborative authorship of many women’s visionary accounts, such as *The Book of Margery Kempe*.¹⁹ The complexity behind Margery’s *Book*, with its ambiguous collaboration between holy woman and several scribes, comes closest to the complexity behind compilations, and in fact, teaching devotional compilations alongside *The Book of Margery Kempe* would help to evoke the historical nuances of its creation and its gendered implications for the “creature” Margery.

Another way that devotional prose’s queer mode of authorship challenges the hegemony of the author figure can be found in its profoundly pastiche nature. The devotional compilation perfectly proves Roland Barthes’s famous proclamation that “the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” that operates as a “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”²⁰ The genre offers a healthy counter-narrative to the modern obsession with novelty and originality. For example, a compilation may be composed of a base text that could be a translation of a Latin work, such as the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, either in part or in whole, but with varying degrees of faithfulness to the original. Then that base text is interpolated with newly written text and extracts from any number of other sources, such as the Bible; the patristic fathers; or quite frequently, visionary accounts by medieval holy women. The author of the compilation known as *A Mirror to Devout People* describes his compositional process, how he has “browgth inne othyr doctorys in diuerse placys, as to the moral vertuys, and also summe reuelacyonys of approuyd

¹⁸Pugh, *Queering Medieval Genres*, 3.

¹⁹On collaborative authorship and women’s writing, see Diane Watt, *Medieval Women’s Writing: Works by and for Women in England, 1100–1500* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

²⁰Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2002), 221–24 (223).

wymmen”—i.e., visionaries Mechthild of Hackeborn, Catherine of Siena, and Birgitta of Sweden.²¹ Birgitta’s *Revelations* were often borrowed from because of the vivid details they revealed about Christ’s life. *Contemplations on the Dread and Love of God*, *A Mirror to Devout People*, and the lesser-known *Meditaciones domini nostri* provide clear examples of Birgittine borrowings, sometimes noted by the narrator, sometimes noted in the margin, sometimes silently interwoven.²²

Regardless of how the sources are acknowledged, the narrator speaks through these other voices, ventriloquizing female visionaries and male theologians alike. Devotional compilations demonstrate a queer heteroglossia in the Bakhtinian sense, as a medieval discourse that “allows a variety of cultural registers and group perspectives to mingle creatively and initiate ‘a struggle among sociolinguistic points of view.’”²³ We might even go so far as to say the genre is comfortable with narrating “in drag.” Gender is being constantly flipped and performed. It is a fundamentally egalitarian and feminist approach, because sources by male authors are not promoted at the expense or devaluation of sources by female authors, as according to a traditionally misogynist hierarchy of *auctoritas*. The so-called “derivative” nature of compilations actually demonstrates a quite politically and theoretically progressive complexity worth preserving as part of the mainstream medieval canon. Such a plurality of authors and problematizing of authorship brings a crucial queer resistance to the very idea of the “major author” driving what we read and teach.

III. Queering Dynamic Transmission

The ambiguous author figure links to another point: that “[p]recisely because of their derivative nature, compilations help us understand medieval forms of authorship and of textual transmission, both of which are

²¹*A Mirror to Devout People (Speculum devotorum)*, ed. Paul J. Patterson, EETS o.s. 346 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6, lines 125–27.

²²See *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*, ed. Margaret Connolly, EETS o.s. 303 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Patterson, *A Mirror to Devout People*; and Laura Saetveit Miles, “An Unnoticed Borrowing from the Treatise of Three Workings in Man’s Soul in the Gospel Meditation *Meditaciones domini nostri*,” *Journal of the Early Book Society* 20 (2017): 277–84.

²³Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, 27, citing in part Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 273.

closely connected.”²⁴ Not only could a compiler weave together writings by multiple authors with their own writing, so could subsequent scribes then change, adapt, shorten, or expand a devotional prose work when they copied it. That means that each iteration, if not a slavishly faithful copy, could represent yet another major authorial intervention by another reader/writer. For this reason devotional compilations in particular have been called “dynamic texts, that is, they can be found in diverse attestations.”²⁵ An already composite text might be cannibalized and recompiled into another new work, or pronoun and single-word changes might shift the intended audience from female to male or neutral. Whether subject to large or small adjustments, their propensity for adaptation meant that devotional works were able to reflect the needs of fresh audiences, adding to their hardiness as long-lived texts circulating over many decades.

Such *mouvance* puts devotional prose in a particularly queer position in relation to the canon. The canon thrives on fixed texts that provide a common reference for innumerable readers regardless of time or place. This fixity perpetuates the assumption (verging on belief) that literary texts can only be good if they are singular, fixable, knowable. (Not that all scholars or students agree, but the canon implicitly helps to promote that belief.) If a single, “best” text of a devotional compilation cannot be identified, or even just if each different version has its own scholarly interest and historical validity as a reflection of evolving reading and writing practices, how does that undermine the nature of canonical conformity? How does that disrupt and broaden our modern ideas of the literary? Such queer disruption becomes more urgent when we realize that any broadening of the canon helps to move its center away from the white, male author whose dominance has silenced alternative literary discourses for millenia.

Of course, we must produce actual editions of these slippery medieval texts if they are going to be studied, appreciated, and canonized. Yet, then, as Marleen Cré, Diane Denisson, and Denis Renevey point out, we must lament “the loss of such nuances and fruitful instability when the compilations are fixed and read in modern editions.”²⁶ Ways partially to

²⁴Marleen Cré, Diane Denisson, and Denis Renevey, “Introduction,” in *Late Medieval Compilations in England*, ed. Cré, Denisson, and Renevey (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 1–26 (2).

²⁵Ibid., 10.

²⁶Ibid., 12.

overcome that fixity include at a very minimum critical editions with a full and rigorous textual apparatus; or yet better, either print or digital parallel-text editions allowing comparison between two or more different versions; or perhaps most promising, a range of digital editing possibilities that display minor and major variants. They also include discussing the texts' fluidity explicitly in any headnote, introduction, or textual analysis: to ignore multiple surviving versions skews how we interpret the text. Pretending that *Pore Caitiff*, for instance, is a single, stable text, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in its lone manuscript, amounts to a closeting of a queer textual history that has much to teach us, even if it makes us slightly uncomfortable or we find it slightly over-complicated for our modern tastes. I do not mean to deny that many other medieval and later texts also change as they are copied or printed for different audiences (as, of course, with the canonical *Canterbury Tales*). But perhaps no other genre displays such dramatic adaptation or active willingness to embrace fragmentation as devotional prose.

IV. Women Readers Queering the Canon

In the Norton contents, the (relatively recent) inclusion of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe means about a quarter of those (known) authors are women, a strong statistic high above the proportion of actual known female authors in medieval England. Yet Julian and Margery's texts survive in scant few witnesses, exposing their canonicity today as somewhat out of alignment with their marginality in their own time. Though the very presence of women visionary authors in the canon is a crucial step forward, another demographic remains glaringly absent from the Norton list: women readers. Devotional texts also deserve higher status because of how they illuminate the ways that women's literary cultures drove the creation of the medieval canon of English literature, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Even if we assume that most of the genre was composed by men, many examples suggest that enclosed women such as nuns and anchoresses provided the motivating energy that drove textual composition and subsequent transmission, and that laywomen were also main consumers.

"Suster, thou hast ofte axed of me a forme of lyung accordyng to thyn estat, inasmuche as thou art enclosed," begins the late medieval vernacular translation of Aelred of Rievaulx's twelfth-century rule of living for

a recluse, titled *De institutione inclusarum*.²⁷ About 300 years later, the anonymous Carthusian author of *A Mirror to Devout People*, written for a Birgittine nun of Syon Abbey, opened his text similarly: “Gostly syster in Ihesu Cryste, I trowe hyt be not 3ytt fro 3oure mynde that whenne we spake laste togyderys I behette 3ow a medytacyon of the Passyon of oure Lorde.”²⁸ Hilton likewise addresses his *Scale* to a “goostli suster,” as did the author of *The Chastising of God’s Children*, and Richard Rolle wrote many of his works for the anchoress Margaret Kirkby. Whether at their behest or not, for the entire medieval period men were writing devotional books specifically for enclosed women, so much so that announcing that audience developed into a rhetorical trope. It could safely be claimed that devotional texts would be the medieval genre most influenced by women readers (perhaps rivaled by visionary accounts by holy women, but their circulation seems heavily driven by male monastic readers). David N. Bell systematically surveys all the books and libraries connected to medieval English nunneries in *What Nuns Read*, and comes to a firm conclusion: “Most English spirituality and much English theology was transmitted in the mother tongue, and there is clear evidence that some nuns had every intention of keeping abreast of the most recent developments.”²⁹ In other words, enclosed women wanted the newest spiritual material, the best domestic and imported works. They drove the market. They were trendsetters, and even if they didn’t write the texts themselves (most of the time), they influenced what those texts were like. Devotional works demonstrate the power that women exerted on textual production and creation of canonical works for wide swaths of medieval readers. Their books quickly escaped the cloister and circulated among other religious and lay readers, both male and female.

Though their contact with the outside world was ostensibly curbed, these religious women readers were connected to broader lay, clerical, and monastic literary cultures, as research has shown. In other words, understanding what and how nuns read enables us to understand the reading of aristocratic women and men, monks, and priests. Mary C. Erler

²⁷ *Aelred of Rievaulx’s “De institutione inclusarum”: Two English Versions*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt, EETS o.s. 287 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1, lines 5–6 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 423).

²⁸ Patterson, *A Mirror to Devout People*, 4, lines 2–4.

²⁹ David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries*, Cistercian Studies Series 168 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 78.

maps how women acquired and passed on texts via female relationships: “these relationships imply that female book ownership was strongly dependent on membership in a community of readers, a community which could take many forms: natal family, interest group, religious institution.”³⁰ She identifies women’s religious institutions as the essential backdrop against which women’s networks of manuscript exchange should be seen. Nuns are important because they are connected—and the main force of that connection is the devotional genre that taps into the prestige of their contemplative life, their efficacious modes of prayerful reading, for the benefit of other readers. In fact, lay readers—both men and women—were even encouraged by devotional works such as *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* to imagine themselves as nuns, shaping their mindset to work like a metaphorical cloister protecting them from worldly distractions and temptations.³¹ Including devotional prose in the modern canon of medieval literature gives representation to enclosed religious women, actually a very powerful group of agents in medieval literary culture, a constituency that until recently have been undervalued based on their gender and their seemingly passive position in society.

V. Canon, Anon., or a Nun?

At this point one might object that many of these devotional works are decidedly conservative, even misogynistic, in their content, thus undermining their potential feminist and queer influence on the canon. Recent detailed examination has shown that while some misogynistic views can certainly be found, in fact “these devotional works alternately promoted, authorized, and condemned a spectrum of identities (sexual, domestic, and spiritual) for their audiences,” as Anne Clark Bartlett has discovered.³² Their heteroglossia, their queer ventriloquization of multiple authorial voices including female visionaries, ensures that a plurality of positions are made available for readers. Bartlett explains how

these texts hail readers to recognize themselves and conform to their often misogynistic feminine identities. However, this agenda is thwarted by the multiplicity

³⁰Mary C. Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 136.

³¹Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 23.

³²Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, x.

of representations by which readers are hailed . . . This process shapes female subjectivity in complex, sometimes self-contradictory ways and provides appealing alternatives to the traditional, and often misogynistic identities constructed for women readers in medieval devotional literature.³³

In the Norton-based canon, *The Book of Margery Kempe* and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, for example, approach this kind of gendered complexity. Devotional works, however, aim to shape their readers in a different way from these texts. Compilations and other spiritual writings cultivate a mode of reading and living that involves a conscious forming of a spiritual interiority, a self-development that represents a significant function of literature in the Middle Ages, one that should not be omitted from our modern understanding of the past.³⁴ Writings in the devotional genre "rely for their success on an informed and developed sense of self-awareness on the part of their readers, and an embracing by them of spiritual autonomy and responsibility."³⁵ Not only could that sense of self-awareness be already developed in the reader, but also that devotional literature actively forms the reader *as a reader* and viewer of the world and themselves, filtering both their inner and outer sight.³⁶

In essence, devotional literature acts in interesting, unexpected ways. As a genre that resists in a queer way the totalizing concepts of single authorship, of originality and novelty, and of textual integrity, devotional writing offers an appealing way to disrupt the constrictions of the modern canon and challenge the imposition of our modern taste on a past cultural reality. As a genre that represents the powerful cultural force of women readers, especially enclosed women readers—those most hidden from both medieval and modern view—devotional writing also helps to diversify the canon and correct hundreds of years of masculine control of the discourse of prestigious literature. Even if much of devotional literature was written by men, its study brings to light how women readers were an engine behind literary culture in medieval England.

This piece aims to push forward a discussion about how devotional literature might in practice become a more central part of the teaching

³³Ibid., 28.

³⁴Jennifer Bryan explores this quality of devotional prose in *Looking Inward*.

³⁵Gillespie, "Anonymous Devotional Writings," 129.

³⁶See Laura Saetveit Miles, "'Syon gostly': Crafting Aesthetic Imaginaries and Stylistics of Existence in Medieval Devotional Culture," in *Emerging Aesthetic Imaginaries*, ed. Lene Johannessen and Mark Ledbetter (Minneapolis: Lexington, 2018).

canon, or gain prestige in the eyes of other medieval scholars. My goal is to plant a seed of resistance to the narrowness of the current canon, to theorize how by expanding it in creative, unexpected ways we might deepen our understanding of the past and its complexity. Surely many agree with that goal; but perhaps not many have considered the seemingly “old-fashioned” genre of devotional writing as a source of queer challenge to the hegemony of the canonical and the formal requirements it perpetuates. Although devotional literature in itself might not be *consistently* radical, its relation to literary norms and heteronorms fulfills the radical potential of the queer, especially as articulated by Donald E. Hall:

It is broadly useful to think of the adjective “queer” in this way: it is to abrade the classifications, to sit athwart conventional categories or traverse several. . . . In this way, we are all queer, if we will simply admit it. We are all athwart if we expose and repudiate some of the comforting lies told about us and that we tell about ourselves.³⁷

To ignore the importance of such religious writing surely qualifies as a comforting lie told by modern scholars to themselves, about the past, despite all the evidence to the contrary; and not only does the historical reality of the past lose out, so do women readers, then and now.

³⁷Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 13.