Women’s Education and Literacy in England, 1066–1540

Megan J. Hall*

Medieval Institute, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN
*Corresponding author. Email: meganjhall@nd.edu

Abstract
This essay provides a holistic review of what girls and young women learned, and the settings in which they learned, in the Middle Ages in England between the Norman Conquest (1066) and the Dissolution of the Monasteries (late 1530s). Education of girls was carried out in households, elementary schools, and nunneries, as well as through employment and apprenticeship. Girls were taught a wide range of subjects, depending on their socioeconomic status, including practical skills, reading comprehension, and social accomplishments. This essay also provides a review to date of the scholarship on the topic.

Keywords: Education; literacy; women; girls; medieval

“How were women educated in post-Conquest England?” Among the challenges in answering this question are a paucity of records for all but the most elite, premises skewed by assumptions about gender roles, and the necessity of seeking scant evidence from multiple disciplines. Not a single monograph has been written surveying the history of medieval English schooling for girls.¹ Rather, the topic receives attention in essays, chapters, and notes—and often only briefly at that—as much discussion of female education is encapsulated within discussions of education broadly and the greatest attention paid to the education of males. The work is vital, however, to achieve a fuller and more diverse understanding of women’s history, the history of learning and literacy, and the social history of the Middle Ages generally. This essay constructs a holistic overview of the present state of this topic, with an emphasis on literacy, reviewing scholarly exploration to date and examining what girls and young women learned in the Middle Ages in England, and the settings in which they learned it, between the Norman Conquest (1066) and the Dissolution of the Monasteries (late 1530s). While this essay presents evidence from all centuries under discussion, it includes greater documentation from the fourteenth century forward, because more records from that era have survived.

¹The closest is Dorothy Gardiner’s English Girlhood at School: A Study of Women’s Education through Twelve Centuries (London: Oxford University Press, 1929). Medieval women’s education (ca. 500–1500) receives six of eighteen chapters.

© History of Education Society 2021
In the Middle Ages, much as today, education modes and paths varied widely depending on the intended purpose of that education, though everyone received some kind of religious, social, and practical, if not literary, education. A medieval person could be considered quite well educated even if unable to write or little accomplished in it. In the first half of the period, the medieval term litteratus meant “learned in Latin” or “scholarly,” rather than “literate” in the modern sense, and applied not only to those professionally in the Church or trained as clerks but also to laymen and women. During the thirteenth century, the term’s significance began to change. As Michael Clanchy points out, “After 1300 it became relatively common to be literate,” so that litteratus implied something closer to our modern understanding, possessing a minimal ability to read, either in the vernacular or in Latin. A further important distinction among levels of literacy should be made as well: nearly all children would have been taught how to sound out both syllables (silibicare) and words (legere) in Latin, even if they did not understand them. The ability to understand what one read (intelligere) came later in education, if at all.

Medieval England was a multilingual nation, dominated by Latin, English, and French (Anglo-Norman), with influences from Celtic, Scandinavian, Germanic, and other languages. Put simply, Latin might be thought of primarily as the language of the Church and clerical learning throughout our period, and also a language used in government and formal education. French was the language of Norman nobility and English elites (especially in London and its environs) from the Norman Conquest of 1066 forward; French was also used for diplomacy and government from about 1250 forward, after which it began to fade from widespread use in the fourteenth century. English was the language spoken by the conquered Anglo-Saxons, though the language continued to thrive, both in written and spoken word, especially in areas removed from southeast England. By the mid-fifteenth century, English had reasserted dominance in nearly every area—daily life, government, literature, and lay religious practice—although the Church and higher education still

\[\text{\url{https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2021.8}}\]
used Latin. Practically speaking, medieval English people encountered and used all three languages regularly.

Because socioeconomic status played a considerable role in the sophistication of one’s education, much of the extant evidence for educational practices survives from the upper classes; determining the educational history of the lower classes is difficult. As J. W. Adamson noted, “The instruction . . . of girls of the middle and lower ranks, whose parents were not absolutely poor but whose condition did not afford more than a competence, constitutes the most baffling problem” of medieval educational history. Formal education was the purview of boys of higher socioeconomic status, beginning with song schools, then moving to grammar schools and on to business or university training. For girls, and any boys not intended for the clergy, law, medicine, or business, education was conceived of more as a wide-ranging set of practices carried out in the various settings of daily life, from home to classroom to workplace. In the latter half of our period, the rising bourgeoisie, the merchant and artisan classes, and in some cases the peasantry, increasingly pursued both practical and literary education (the ability to read, especially in the vernacular). The historic and literary record more thoroughly captures this increase, which can be traced to the disintegration of the post-Conquest feudal system, induced in great part by the social mobility brought on by labor shortages in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the emergence of the merchant class, and the growth of urban centers, together with growing vernacular literacy and book ownership from about the thirteenth century onward. Finally, while education certainly carried on into adulthood, as in our own age, the primary focus here will be to show what education entailed, and how and where medieval girls received education, in the stages of childhood: infantia (birth to about seven years of age), pueritia (about seven to fourteen years of age), and adolescentia (about fourteen to twenty-one years of age, or higher).

Literature Review

Our subject lies at the intersection of several lines of inquiry: the history of education, the history of literacy (particularly of the laity), and the social history of women. The first of these, the history of education in England, can trace modern scholarly inquiry back to 1818 with the work of Nicholas Carlisle on endowed grammar schools. A. F. Leach made the next major contributions to this field; though problematic in

---

7 Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 57.
8 On the complexities of a trilingual England, with a number of helpful citations therein for further reading, see Christopher Cannon, “Vernacular Latin,” *Speculum* 90, no. 3 (July 2015), 641–53.
10 A variety of frameworks were imposed upon the ages of humankind, though these major divisions for the stages of childhood were fairly commonly accepted. See Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: the Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, 1066–1530* (London: Methuen, 1984), 5–7; and Daniel T. Kline, “Female Childhoods,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13–20, at 13.
some of its methodologies, his work represents the foundations of the systematic study of the history of education in medieval England. Following him, though decades later, Nicholas Orme, perhaps the most prolific and important scholar still on medieval English education, produced the next significant body of work. The following are particularly pertinent to the exploration of girls’ education: From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, in which Orme focuses on the high and late Middle Ages; noteworthy are his careful inclusion and analysis of female education. His English Schools in the Middle Ages was superseded by his Medieval Schools from Roman Britain to Renaissance England. In both, he looks helpfully at what relation education had to all strata of society, from nobility to villeins, and gives an overview of how schools developed in England and what they taught, though the latter is quite limited in its attention to girls. Medieval Children contains two important chapters, “Learning to Read” and “Reading for Pleasure,” which provide critical information on girls’ education in both infanti and pueritia.

Alongside these works, two others stand out for particular focus on the education of women. The first, folded into a broader study of nunneries, surveys the education nuns received as well as gave to children: Eileen Power’s foundational Medieval English Nunneries (1922), discussed below. David Bell’s landmark study, What Nuns Read, as well as the work of Alexandra Barratt and J. G. Clark expand on Power and update some conclusions. The second is Dorothy Gardiner’s English Girlhood at School, the first of its kind to survey the education of English girls from the Anglo-Saxon era into the modern age. Like Power’s work, Gardiner’s history laid the foundations for future research on the topic.

Adjacent to the study of the history of education is the history of literacy in England. Male literacy (both clerical and lay) has been well explored, but too little research has been undertaken on the literacy of nuns, much less lay women. Victorian scholars, taking up the question, tended to assume a general illiteracy of

---


14Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries, c. 1275 to 1535 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1922).


the lay population, and particularly of women. Clanchy’s publication of From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307 set off a seismic shift in literacy studies. In it, he traces the shifting uses, practices, and valuation of literacy in post-Conquest England. His exploration of the literacy of the laity, and particularly his consideration of women’s literacy, make this work a cornerstone of the exploration of female education in high medieval England. Further, his 2018 publication, Looking Back from the Invention of Printing: Mothers and the Teaching of Reading in the Middle Ages, brings together much of his important work on women’s literacy and education in the intervening years. Key in this field as well is the work of Malcolm Parkes, who proposed a range of reading abilities for understanding literacy, rather than the binary structure of literate/illiterate. Ralph V. Turner and K. B. McFarlane further expanded scholarly knowledge of the learning of the aristocracy. Jo Ann Hoeppner Moran Cruz, through an important deep dive into the records of York schools, fleshed out the educational life of late medieval York and, in the process, reflected on the general education of boys and girls and especially elementary education. A rich vein for exploring women’s literacy in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries is found in the Ancrene Wisse (A Guide for Anchoresses), the Katherine Group, and the Wooing Group texts, written for lay women. Scholars of these texts have long credited women with vernacular literacy, but the consideration of lay women’s Latinity has just begun. More scholars than can be named here have examined women’s reading activity, literary patronage, and book ownership in late medieval England; one of the earliest and most groundbreaking contributions came from Susan Groag Bell.

---


18Michael Clanchy, Looking Back from the Invention of Printing: Mothers and the Teaching of Reading in the Middle Ages (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2018).

19For his discussion of this, see Parkes, “Literacy of the Laity.”


23Susan Groag Bell, “Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture,” Signs 7, no. 4 (Summer 1982), 742–68. For an examination of how the field has progressed since Bell’s essay and a bibliography of other important reading, see Fiona J. Griffiths, “Susan Groag...
Finally, the study of medieval English women’s lives informs any consideration of their literacy and education. One might start again with Power, a founding mother of the study of women’s social history. In addition to Medieval English Nunneries, she is well known for Medieval People and Medieval Women, a posthumously published collection of her lectures that includes chapters on education and nuns. Power’s work, though since expanded upon, was some of the first to address in detail the social history of women as their primary subject, covering all aspects of life, from physical to occupational to intellectual. From Power we must leap forward for our next clutch of scholarship into the 1970s, when studies of medieval women’s history became more mainstream. John Lawson and Harold Silver’s Social History of Education in England is a broad look at society and education from the Anglo-Saxon era to the modern period and includes sections on girls. More recently, Barbara Hanawalt has explored medieval childhood at length, and Daniel Kline female childhood specifically. Merridee L. Bailey examines the ideals behind, though not the practices of, medieval and early modern childhood education through courtesy literature and school statutes.

What Did Girls Learn?

For English boys in the last half of the Middle Ages, formal schooling, if undertaken, began in *infantia* with song or small local schools, where boys learned to read and sing, with a progression in *pueritia* to Latin grammar school. In *adolescentia* boys could then move to business studies, or liberal arts at a university, and then on to further study of medicine, canon or civil law, or theology. Though girls were, as far as we know, unable to follow these formal paths beyond song school, and perhaps grammar school to some extent, education was taken seriously for girls nonetheless. In a surviving agreement of 1432, for example, regarding the upbringing of his step-daughter Isabella Stonor, Richard Drayton and Isabella’s mother, Alice, pledged that they “sufficienter et honeste invenerimus et sustentaverimus Isabellam Stonore . . . in victu et vestitu ac doctrina etati et gradui suis convenientibus” (will adequately and honorably maintain and support Isabella Stonor . . . in food, clothing, and teaching appropriate for her age and rank).
Figure 1. Detail of a miniature of Christine de Pizan in her study, from The Book of the Queen, produced in France c.1410–1414 and presented to Isabel (Isabeau) of Bavaria, queen consort of Charles VI of France. The manuscript was produced under Marie de France’s supervision. © The British Library Board, London, British Library, Harley MS 4431, fol. 4r, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_4431.

Society, 1919), 50. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted. For discussion, see Jennifer C. Ward, trans. and ed., Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066–1500 (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 75–77.
Girls, alongside boys, would begin their literacy education in *infantia* by learning the Latin alphabet, pronouncing and perhaps singing Latin words, achieving the first level of literacy, *sillibicare* and *legere*, even if not understanding their meanings. This learning was primarily in service to the religious practices woven throughout life in medieval England. Nearly all sectors of society would have gained this basic level of literacy. Girls likely learned from the same tools as boys at this earliest phase of their education. The Latin alphabet and simple prayers such as the Pater Noster, the Ave, and the Creed were the first texts taught. They could be written out on a number of surfaces for children to look at, such as boards or walls, trays with sand or ash, or tablets made of slate, horn, or board and parchment. The ABCs and prayers could also be presented in primers. For example, a late medieval wall alphabet survives in the vestry of the Church of St. Michael in North Cadbury, Somerset, and the accounts of William Loveney, clerk of the great wardrobe of Henry of Lancaster, Earl of Derby, note that “two ‘books’ of ABC were bought for 20d in 1397 for Blanche and Philippa the daughters of Henry IV, when they were 5 and 3 respectively.”

At age four, Margaret Plumpton Rowcliffe, granddaughter of Sir William Plumpton (1404–1480), was described by her future father-in-law as a girl who “speaketh Prattely and french and hath near hand learned her sawter [Psalter].” Adamson notes as well that the earliest English primers were made for girls (the earliest surviving manuscript dates from about 1400).

After acquiring these abilities, girls would learn reading comprehension—*intelligere*—and would be offered more sophisticated religious texts to learn from, such as saints’ lives, prayer books, books of hours, antiphonals, and psalters and, depending on their social class and needs, would have been reading on their own. Girls would perhaps most commonly learn to read in French or English, but they certainly could be taught to read and understand Latin. From the historical record comes the late eleventh-century example of St. Margaret of Scotland and her daughter Matilda, wife of Henry I. The chronicler Robert of Torigni notes their advanced learning in his *Historia Henrici Primi*, remarking, “Quantae autem sanctitatis et scientiae tam saecularis quam spiritualis utraque regina, Margareta scilicet et Mathildis, fuerint” (Of how great holiness and learning, as well secular as spiritual, were these two queens, Margaret and Matilda); he refers his readers to their Latin *vita* for more on their accomplishments. In this *vita*, commissioned by Matilda, Margaret’s biographer writes that from her youth she would “in Divinarum lectionum studio sese occupare, 

---

30 The National Archives: Public Records Office DL 28/1/6 fol. 36, accounts of William Loveney, clerk of the great wardrobe of Henry of Lancaster, earl of Derby. Orme describes both the church wall and Loveney’s account in *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 158.


32 Adamson, “Extent of Literacy,” 166.


et in his animum delectabiliter exercere” (occupy herself with the study of the Holy Scriptures, and delightfully exercise her mind) and notes that her husband, King Malcom III, cherished the “libros, in quibus ipsa vel orare consueverat, vel legere” (books, which she herself used either for prayer or reading), even though Malcom himself could not read Latin.35

Some women saints and literary characters were taught extensively by highly trained masters. Three of these characters—Felice, Morgan, and Viviane—are educated variously in all the arts and then some, including astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, necromancy, decorum, writing, classical authors, theology, and philosophy. St. Katherine of Alexandria is described in her early Middle English saint’s life as an “icuret clergesse” (distinguished female scholar).36 The fifteenth-century Ywain and Gawain, itself a revised translation into English from Chrétien de Troyes’s twelfth-century Ywain, features literate women as well. First appears Lady Alundyne, after her husband’s burial, consoling herself and praying for her husband’s soul, reading from her psalter: “Opon a sawter al of gulde / To say the salmes fast sho bigan” (She opened a psalter made of gold / and began to say the psalms quickly). The fifteen-year-old daughter of the knight reads as well: “The mayden red at thai [so they] myght here, / A real [royal/courtly] romance in that place.”37 Their writers, of course, deployed these hagiographical and literary figures for particular purposes—providing spiritual instruction, offering aspirational models for women readers, and creating epitomized romantic heroines are just a few—but literary examples preserve records of historical practice. For example, from the twelfth century forward, households increasingly built and used their personal libraries, which held works from didactic texts to pleasure reading; the knight’s daughter’s reading highlights this practice.38 Too, the high education of St. Katherine is presented as a great virtue; she is an aspirational model for women. Thus, while we must look to literary and hagiographical examples discerningly, they form two invaluable strata of evidence.

Power also notes a number of historical examples of women who received books for their personal libraries as bequests, noting that this practice appears mainly confined to the upper classes; as both personal book ownership and the bourgeois grew, though, the practice expanded:

In 1269 William de Beauchamp leaves his daughter Joan a book of Lancelot; and in 1380 Elisabeth de la Zouche leaves to her husband a book called Tristrem and Lancelot and to a certain churchman her portiforium psalter and other books. In

1305 Alice Lady West leaves her daughter-in-law ‘all my books of Latin, English and French’ and in 1432 the woman servant of a York chaplain receives under a will ‘an English book of fables and tales’. Twenty years later the fortunate niece of Sir Thomas Cumberworth receives by his will ‘my book of the tales of Canterbury’.

Some girls were also taught to write, particularly if they were being trained for a trade or craft that required this ability, such as shopkeeping, bookbinding, or notary work. Aristocratic women would likely have turned to the services of their clerk or a secretary, such as the Paston women’s letters show.

Women could certainly have also been taught literacy skills (legere and intelligere in Latin and the vernaculars) in nunneries. St. Margaret of Scotland’s daughter Matilda was educated at the English nunneries of Wilton and Romsey and could read and possibly compose in Latin. Historically, highly Latinate women such as Matilda tended to be of noble birth and found in the first two centuries after the Conquest, many of them educated at nunneries, where Latin learning was quite high. A Latin manuscript with a rare scribal attribution survives, for example, from twelfth-century Nunnaminster in Winchester, identifying the copyist as a woman (learned Latin compositions coming out of nunneries in this time period are discussed later). Starting in about 1300, however, the teaching and composition of Latin in nunneries generally started to decline, even while vernacular literacy rates rose.

David Bell and Power both note the evidence in bishops’ registers that reflects this: Latin and French are common languages in bishops’ correspondence with English nunneries in the thirteenth century, but most of the fourteenth-century correspondence is in French; in the fifteenth century and beyond, English is used in nearly all writings. Still, Latin learning continued favorably in some well-positioned houses into the fifteenth century, though Bell concludes, “It is undoubtedly true that from the early fourteenth century onwards, most nuns (and probably most laymons) were unable to read and understand a non-liturgical text in Latin.”

Girls, like boys, learned many more things beyond the literary and religious, especially outside of a nunnery and away from a clerical tutor. Social learning for upper-class girls included deportment, manners, and proper social relations as well as skills in music, riding, hunting, archery, and tapestry work. Training in household

---

43 The lack of evidence for female Latin composition in England might be for any or all of these reasons: no composition taking place, scarce survival for composition activity, or heavy deployment of the humility topos, as numerous Latin compositions by women survive from the Continent in this period. Slightly more attributed materials survive in Anglo-Norman and English. For a discussion, see Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 67.
medicine and practice at games of mental and physical skill rounded out the curric-

ulum.\footnote{On social learning, see Orme, From Childhood to Chivalry, especially chap. 1, 5. On medicine, see also Power, Medieval Women, 86.} We know as well that girls in classes below the aristocracy would certainly have been taught trades and textiles, and Orme notes that the love of hunting “spread . . . right down to the children of the gentry.”\footnote{Orme, From Childhood to Chivalry, 193.} Didactic literature, though little was written for girls until the fifteenth century, offered guidance to parents and children on many of these pursuits. Geoffrey Chaucer’s Virginia, in “The Physician’s Tale,” is a model of virtue and manners, reflecting the idealized upbringing this literature pointed to.

Finally, a note on the lowest class of women. Power contends that “it is certain that the overwhelming majority of peasant women or general domestic servants received no education at all. They might be instructed in the rudiments of religion by a parish priest, but it is unlikely that they could read themselves.”\footnote{Power, Medieval Women, 86.} Yet we must remember that, for many women, the ability to read or write beyond a functional level for the practice of religion or one’s legal protection was unnecessary in a society in which literacy was not always required to make a living.

Places of Learning for Girls

With the wide range of subjects that entered into a girl’s formation in childhood, where was this learning undertaken? In short, in many different settings. Because education for girls did not typically take place in the same formal schools as for boys, such as those who were preparing for a university-trained career, girls were generally trained in the domestic settings they inhabited, usually first in their own homes or another household. Education also happened beyond the home, in an elementary school, nunnery, or apprenticeship.

The Household

A girl could be educated in her own home or someone else’s through fostering, entering domestic service, or joining a classroom hosted in a royal or aristocratic household. Teaching was carried out by a range of individuals, from parents to clergy to specialists such as scribes, huntsmen, or minstrels. Instruction for girls especially, as Kim M. Phillips observes, was predominantly oral, with texts supplementing instruction or being read aloud to girls, until they were able to read them on their own.\footnote{Kim M. Phillips, Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540 (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 61–71, at 62. It is important to note as well that the practice of silent reading did not develop until later in the Middle Ages, so much reading was oral for both boys and girls. On this, see Paul Saenger, Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).} Nowhere is this seen more clearly than education in infantia, usually guided by a mother or a nurse, who taught the fundamentals of reading as part of the beginnings of religious instruction. Girls (and boys) educated in the nursery would learn...
the Latin alphabet as well as foundational Latin prayers and recitations, including the Pater Noster, the Creed and the Ave.

The importance of mothers teaching their children is both acknowledged in educational treatises and captured in literary and artistic representations. In England, from at least 1300 onward, manuscript illustrations, stained-glass windows, and wall paintings pointed parents to the model of St. Anne teaching her daughter, the Virgin Mary, to read. Some of these surviving representations indicate further the teaching tools mothers might have used. An early fourteenth-century book of hours depicts St. Anne using what looks like an early form of hornbook to teach Mary to read. As Orme notes, the teaching tool is frequently a spiritual text—a stained-glass window in the church at Stanford-on-Avon shows St. Anne using a book of hours to teach Mary.

The high and late Middle Ages in England saw accomplished scholars writing many educational treatises and mirrors for princes (specula principum), though most of these were written for aristocratic young men. Only three treatise writers, all of the thirteenth century, included any reflections on educating girls. Bartholomew the Englishman has the least to say, offering only general remarks in a single chapter. Giles of Rome says a bit more, but only to recommend textile production for most girls, and reading for noble girls, who are not suited to work in textiles. Vincent of Beauvais is the most expansive in addressing the education of girls specifically, calling for preparation both for domestic life as the head of a household and for strong spiritual formation. He particularly desires the skills of reading and

---

49 On the cult of St. Anne and the teaching of reading, see Orme, Medieval Children, 244–45; and Clanchy, “Did Mothers Teach their Children to Read?,” in Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400–1400: Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser, ed. Conrad Leyser and Lesley Smith (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 129–53. One example may be found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson Liturg.d.1, dating from c. 1420; fol. 100v contains an inhabited initial showing St. Anne using a book to teach Mary. For further examples and a detailed analysis of the Education of the Virgin motif, see Wendy Scase, “St. Anne and the Education of the Virgin,” in England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1991 Harlaxton Symposium, ed. Nicholas Rogers (Stamford, UK: Paul Watkins, 1993), 81–98.

50 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 231, fol. 3r.

51 For a discussion of this window, see Orme, Medieval Children, 244–45.

52 Peter Alfonsi’s Disciplina Clericalis (early twelfth century), John of Salisbury’s Poli craticus (mid-twelfth century), Gerald of Wales’s De principis instructione (early thirteenth century), Vincent of Beauvais’s De eruditione filiorum nobilium (mid-thirteenth century), the Secretum secretorum (first half of the thirteenth century), Giles of Rome’s De regimine principum (late thirteenth century), Jean Golein’s translation of De administrione principum (fourteenth or fifteenth century), the Three Considerations (fifteenth century), Thomas Hoccleve’s Regement of Princes (early fifteenth century), and an encyclopedia by Bartholomew the Englishman, De proprietatibus rerum (late thirteenth century) are but a few of the more influential texts.

53 Though these treatise writers were French, their work was influential in England (see Orme, From Childhood to Chivalry, 86, 94–95, 90–97, 107, 157).


writing to support spiritual study and devotion and to turn girls from undesirable pursuits.56

Perhaps more influential on household education by parents were treatises written by two laymen: Walter of Bibbesworth, a wealthy English landowner and knight, and Geoffroy de la Tour Landry, a French knight. Walter’s Anglo-Norman verse *Tretiz* is one of our most important texts for learning about what education, and particularly language acquisition, looked like in the household in the centuries following the Conquest. Walter wrote the work in the 1230s to help his neighbor Dionisie de Munechensi educate her young children in French more advanced than the vernacular language they would have picked up naturally.57 He opens the poem with “Chere soer, pur ceo ke vus me priastes ke jeo meyse en escrit pur vos enfaunz acune aprise en fraunceis en breve paroles” (Dear sister, because you have asked that I put in writing something for your children to learn French in brief phrases).58 The *Tretiz* is structured around the life of a child, and then adult, growing up on a large estate like the ones on which Walter and Dionisie lived. The earliest lines portray life in the home nursery. Walter frames vocabulary in life stages that will be familiar to the readers, directing Dionisie that as soon as an aristocratic English child reaches an age to use language effectively, he “en fraunceis lui devez dire” (must be able to speak French) properly, “qu’il en parole seit meuz apris / e de nul autre escharnis” (so that he might be better understood in speech / and not be mocked by others).59 He lays out pronouns and articles as examples: “Pur l’ordre aver de ‘moun’ e ‘ma’ / ‘Ton’ e ‘ta’, ‘soun’ e ‘ça’, ‘le’ e ‘la” (To have the correct usage of ‘my’ [masculine] and ‘my’ [feminine] / ‘Your’ [masc.] and ‘your’ [fem.], ‘his’ [masc.] and ‘this,’ ‘the’ [masc.] and ‘the’ [fem.]). The careful distinction of the words here, the frequent homophones Walter employs throughout, and the interlinear English glosses in the surviving manuscripts all demonstrate that such a book was meant for reading by show-and-tell, not simply oral instruction: the children needed to see how the words were spelled, not just how they sounded, and Walter meant for Dionisie to be the one to teach her children to read and speak. The text quickly moved beyond the de Munechensi household, however; at least eighteen manuscripts survive of this text, reflecting its continuing popularity, and by the fourteenth century the text had grown so fashionable that it had been drawn into a teaching collection called the *Femina nova* (New Woman) for a much broader, and specifically female, audience, taking on a new role as part of conduct literature.60


57For further discussion, see Clanchy, *From Memory*, 199–202.

58Dionisie had recently married the aristocrat Warin de Munechensi, gaining two young stepchildren; she also gave birth to a son in the year after her marriage. For more of the background of the *Tretiz*, see Andrew Dalby, trans. and ed., introduction to *The Treatise (Le Tretiz) of Walter of Bibbesworth* (Totnes, UK: Prospect Books, 2012). The quotation comes from p. 38.


60On the spread of the text, see Dalby, *Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth*, 21.
Walter wrote his *Tretiz* for teaching both boys and girls. In the next century, educational treatises directed only to girls began to appear outside of England. Of these, the only one known to circulate in England was Geoffroy’s *Le Livre pour l’enseigne-ment de ses filles du Chevalier de La Tour Landry*, written in 1371–72. (Most courtesy literature continued to be directed at boys and men.) The text came into England first by an anonymous translation sometime between 1425 and 1475. Geoffroy notes specifically “that as for wrytyng it is no force / if a woman can [knows] nought of hit but as for redyngye I saye that good and prouffyttable is to al wymen,” and he intends for his daughters to learn reading skills. Though his work is not as sophisticated or structured as the formal treatise writers, Geoffroy is, like them, concerned with a wide range of educational areas for his daughters, their social accomplishments as well as their moral comportment. *Le Livre* was picked up by William Caxton and translated again and printed in 1483, in part because of the growing popularity of guidance literature for classes beyond the aristocracy, and indeed, Caxton’s preface notes that the book is intended not just for noble girls but for all classes.

Three similar works aimed at girls appeared in the mid-fourteenth century, framed as a mother’s advice to her daughter: “How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Doughter,” “The Good Wife Wold a Pilgrimage,” and “The Thewis [Customs] of Gud Women.” While some scholars argue such courtesy literature acts as guides to or records of expected medieval female deportment of those below the aristocratic class, others disagree. Felicity Riddy sees “How the Goode Wife” as idealistic, embodying a push to form a “bourgeois ethos” in the later Middle Ages,” as the rising bourgeois class sought to establish its identity and differentiate from craftspeople and other “lesser merchant groups.” Orme similarly argues:

Manners, like most things that were learnt by girls, were acquired informally—orally and visually—from their mothers and mistresses, not written down and studied as by boys. In this respect the literature of manners, though it reveals the usual sexual difference of medieval education, is a very poor guide to the civil-ization of medieval women.

Notably, each of these poems shows a conspicuous absence of advice about literary education. Instead, all focus solely on appropriate behavior in religion, society, and marriage. As Riddy argues, and Bailey expands on, these poems appear to be aimed primarily at bourgeois girls, ostensibly more out in the world than their

---

61London, British Library, Harley MS 1764.
65Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 141.
aristocratic counterparts, and more concerned with social customs perhaps than those in lower classes. These poems, and the adaptation of Geoffroy’s *Le Livre* for expanded classes of girls, show a shift away from sophisticated literary education to an almost exclusive emphasis on manners, morals, and marriage. It must be noted, however, that among the aristocracy, women’s literary education continued, even improving in its inclusion of Latin, into the early modern period. As Orme notes, “The revival of personal Latin studies among women begins, as it does among men, at the very end of the fifteenth century.”

Upon reaching the age of *pueritia* and moving outside the nursery (though this was not a fixed transitional moment because there was no universal agreement on when *pueritia* began), a girl would then often move into the care of a mistress (called contemporaneously *magistra*, *magistrix*, or *maitresse*). For the upper classes this often meant a woman of noble rank who oversaw a girl’s continued education in decorum and social skills as well as in pursuits of her socioeconomic station and intellectual matters. These pursuits might range from textile work, dancing, and music to hunting, reading, and Latin grammar. The mistress herself would not necessarily teach all of these subjects but could call on others to help with instruction, often other members of the household, such as the chaplain, huntsman, or minstrel.

Examples, both historical and literary, survive of this educational phase. In the twelfth century, Sibylla of Anjou and Matilda of Normandy, aunts of Henry II, are recorded as having had the same grammar master and reading instructor, Matthew, as their nephew. Cecily of Sandford is recorded as having had charge of at least two aristocratic girls in the late twelfth/early thirteenth centuries: Eleanor, the youngest daughter of King John and Isabella of Angoulême, and afterwards Eleanor’s niece by marriage, Joan de Munechensi (for whose stepmother Walter wrote his *Tretiz*). Cecily oversaw Eleanor’s education until Eleanor was married at about the start of *adolescentia*. Matthew Paris, monk of St. Albans and writer of the important *Chronica Majora*, praises Cecily as “docta valde et faceta et eloquens” (greatly learned and witty and eloquent). In the fourteenth century, Theophania de Saint-Pierre was mistress to Isabella of France up to her marriage to Edward II. Also in the late fourteenth century, Katherine Swynford, like Dionisie de Munechensi, acted as mistress to John of Gaunt’s daughters, Philippa and Elizabeth. Royal girls in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well had

---

67 Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 161.
68 Boys (especially royal princes) typically followed the same path of moving from the nursery into the care of an educator-caretaker: *pedagogus* (a term used into the eleventh century) or *magister* or *me[j]stre* (terms in use from the twelfth century forward) (Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 19).
69 Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 27.
72 Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 27.
mistresses brought in to teach them. Such records survive for two daughters of Edward IV: Elizabeth of York in the care of Margaret, Lady Berners, in 1468, and Mary of York in the care of Joan, Lady Dacre, in 1482.\textsuperscript{73} Mary Tudor, daughter of Henry VII, was taught by William Hone, schoolmaster, and Henry VIII’s daughter Mary was taught by Thomas Linacre.\textsuperscript{74} She was in the care of at least three mistresses as well: Margaret Bryan in 1516, Elizabeth Denton in 1517, and Margaret, Countess of Salisbury, in 1520.\textsuperscript{75} Literary figures Melior of the late twelfth-century romance \textit{Partonopeu de Blois}, Felice of the thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman romance \textit{Gui de Warewic}, and Morgan and Viviane of the thirteenth-century \textit{L’Estoire de Merlin} are all given an exceedingly impressive education by exceptionally skilled tutors.\textsuperscript{76} From the genre of hagiography, the same is true of St. Katherine of Alexandria in her thirteenth-century early Middle English life.\textsuperscript{77}

Girls, like boys, were sometimes sent to other households for fostering, though apart from the royal records, Orme observes that there is little recorded detail about this practice until the second half of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{78} Katherine, daughter of John of Gaunt, for example, was sent to the household of Lady Mohun at Dunster Castle in Somerset in 1380, when Katherine was about seven years old.\textsuperscript{79} The Paston Letters reveal the frequent placement of Paston daughters in other households; for instance, Elizabeth Paston, in her late twenties, was boarded in the household of Lady Pole in 1458. Margaret Paston worked to arrange a place for her daughter Margery in 1469, while her other daughter Anne was also living in another household.\textsuperscript{80} In fact, as Power remarks, “All great fifteenth-century collections of letters from English gentry—Paston Letters, Stonor Papers and Plumpton Correspondence—show us girls sent away from home to be in attendance on some mistress of rank.”\textsuperscript{81}

Two examples from the verse romance \textit{Floris and Blancheflour} (c. 1250) provide a summary view of education in the home, first in that of Floris, and then in the home of his aunt and uncle; both passages feature coeducation as well. Given the young ages

\textsuperscript{73}The National Archives: Public Records Office, E 403/41 sub 1 Dec; London, College of Arms, MS I.II, fol. 21. Orme discusses these records in \textit{From Childhood to Chivalry}, 28.


\textsuperscript{75}Brewer, \textit{Letters and Papers}, 2.1, 874; 2, 1191; 3.1, 323.


\textsuperscript{78}Orme, \textit{From Childhood to Chivalry}, 45.


\textsuperscript{80}Orme discusses these examples in \textit{From Childhood to Chivalry}, 59.

\textsuperscript{81}Power, \textit{Medieval Women}, 82.
of the two children, the first example likely would have taken place in *infantia*. To placate his son, Floris’s father, the king, agrees to have Blancheflour, with whom Floris has been raised and loves, taught alongside Floris:

To scole they were put.
Both they were good of wytte;
... When they had five yere to scoole goon,
So wel they had lerned thoo,
Inowgh they couth of Latyne,
And wel wryte on parchemyn.⁸²

(They were put to schooling. Both were clever; ... When they had gone to school for five years, they had then learned so well that they knew sufficient Latin and could write well on parchment.)

After these five years of schooling, Floris is sent, without Blancheflour this time, to the noble household of his aunt and her husband, Duke Orgas, where he is once again put into school together with boys and girls, this time by his aunt: “His aunt set him to lore / There as other children wore, / Both maydons and grom; / To lerne mony theder coom” (His aunt set him to learning / there where other children were, / both girls and boys; / many came there to learn).⁸³

As with all literary examples, we cannot take this as a direct representation of what happened in a royal household; yet neither have we any indication that this account is wildly exaggerated, apart from the romance genre standard of dramatizing the qualities and adventures of the major figures. The way in which Blancheflour receives an excellent education alongside the royal son of the household in which she herself is being fostered, learning Latin and scribal skills, and Floris’s journey to another household, where he continues his education, might reasonably be seen as something like the experiences of girls like Katherine and the younger Paston daughters.

**Nunneries**

For families with sufficient means and status, nunneries were a popular place to send girls (and young boys) for fostering and education outside the home, a tradition carried forward from the Anglo-Saxon period.⁸⁴ While boys resided there primarily only in *infantia*, girls might stay until they were older, commonly through *pueritia*.⁸⁵ In some cases, daughters were sent with the intention of taking up the religious life, as was the case with Mary of Woodstock, daughter of Edward I, who became

---

⁸²“Floris and Blancheflour,” in *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, ed. Erik Kooper, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), ll.10-12.

⁸³Kooper, “Floris and Blancheflour,” ll.109-12.


dedicated to Amesbury Priory in 1285 at age seven.86 Most girls, though, were sent to nunneries as if to a boarding school, some with the option to stay on as nuns: Lady Beatrix Constable sent her daughter Elizabeth to Watton Priory in 1505 at age eight with the option to choose at age twelve (near the end of pueritia) whether she wanted to stay or return home.87 The wealthiest nunneries, particularly the ones in which aristocratic girls were placed (such as Wilton, Shaftesbury, Nunnaminster, and Barking), were likely to have provided the highest levels of education. This meant, of course, that less wealthy or prestigious families might have been able to send their children to smaller nunneries to obtain a solid, if not literarily exalted, education.88 In Chaucer’s “Reeve’s Tale,” the miller Symkyn’s wife, the illegitimate daughter of the town priest, “was yfostered in a nonnerye”; Symkyn insisted on having a “wel ynorissed” (well educated) wife. His wife was haughty on account of “hire kynrede and hire nortelrie / That she hadde learned in the nonnerie” (her lineage and her education / which she had learned in the nunnery).89

It is worth noting a few statistics to understand the scope and size of English nunneries in the second half of the Middle Ages, keeping in mind that the most detailed records survive only from the last three centuries of our time period. There were far fewer nuns and nunneries than monks, canons, friars, and monasteries: right before the fourteenth-century plague, there were fewer than five thousand nuns in England, about one-third the population of regular male clergy, living in about 144 nunneries.90 By the Dissolution, the number of nuns stood at just fifteen hundred.91 Further, only a few nunneries were truly large and prosperous; most were small and

---


88 Power, Medieval Women 81.


91 Cox Russell estimates nuns totaled 1,576, while male religious totaled 6,740, with an estimated total population of 2.5 million. Cox Russell, “Clerical Population of Medieval England,” 181, 212. For sources of total population, see previous footnote. Eileen Power sets the total number of nunneries at 138, while David Bell updates that to 144. For calculations, see Power, Medieval English Nunneries, 1; R. Midmer, English Mediaeval Monasteries 1066–1540 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 357–58; and David Bell, What Nuns Read, 33.
struggled to get by. Apart from the venerable Anglo-Saxon institutions and the late medieval foundation of Syon (founded 1415)—the five largest and richest institutions were Shaftesbury, Amesbury, Barking, Wilton, and Syon—a pre-Dissolution assessment of 132 nunneries (nearly all of them) found that 75 percent brought in less than £100 in income a year, and over sixty-six of them brought in less than £50 a year, to support the entire house. At a time when an unskilled laborer earned about £5 a year, this meant most nunneries were quite poor. Power estimates that perhaps two-thirds of nunneries across the country could take in boarders—and a small number of them at that—nor did all nunneries have other resources, such as large libraries or sufficiently educated nuns, to conduct extensive learning and teaching.

Despite the challenges of their secular presence in a religious house, students provided income, and those that could accept children likely did so in proportion to the nunnery’s size. At the time of its dissolution in 1537, Sopwell Priory had two children living in the house, and five nuns. By contrast, at Nunnaminster, a large foundation dating back to the Anglo-Saxon period, records indicate that in 1536 twenty-six girls were boarded there, with sixteen nuns in the house. Families would be charged sometimes quite high fees for the children’s room, board, and education. Several surviving examples, all from the latter half of this time, illustrate this. Laurence Knight was charged (but never paid) 10d weekly to send his daughters Elizabeth, seven, and Jane, ten, to Cornworthy Priory “to teche them to school.” Payment was made in 1416–17 to the prioress of Bungay Priory for the stay of Philippa de la Pole, daughter of Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, and Lady Katherine Stafford. The same entry in the roll notes that Michael and Katherine’s granddaughters Elizabeth and Isabella also stayed at Bungay Priory at least during this season, and that Elizabeth also stayed at Bruisyard for nearly half a year, with expenses paid to “a friar there called ’le President’ for his labour in teaching Elizabeth while she was there.”

What did girls learn at nunneries? It is difficult to say much about curriculum at medieval English nunneries, though some insight can be gleaned from literary examples, the historical record, and the analysis of nunneries’ libraries. Spiritual formation was almost certainly an important component of education at nunneries. As at

---

92 Bell, _What Nuns Read_, 11.
94 Power, _Medieval Nunneries_, 408–19; Barratt, “Small Latin,” particularly 51, 65; Bell, _What Nuns Read_, particularly 65; and Orme, _Medieval Schools_, 275–78.
97 Power, _Medieval Women_, 81.
100 Power, _Medieval English Nunneries_, 238, 260.
home, Latin and spirituality would likely have been introduced together when learning to recite the ABCs and say prayers (possibly learning singing, as the nuns did). Students would then move on to reading comprehension in Latin, English, and French, and perhaps composition in these languages as well, if the nuns themselves could write or brought in tutors.\textsuperscript{101}

Nuns were also occupied with spinning, needlework, and embroidery and also likely learned something of home medical care and herbal remedies; thus, they might have taught all of these to their pupils—all very similar to what could have been learned at home.\textsuperscript{102} Instruction in courtliness would possibly have been offered as well, a practice portrayed in Marie de France’s late twelfth-century \textit{Lai le Fresne}. Fresne is unwanted by her mother and so is secretly left at a nearby nunnery to be taken in. The abbess raises Fresne as her niece and brings her up so that “En Bretaine ne fu si bele / Ne tant curteise dameisele: / Franche esteit e de bone escole / En semblant e en parole” (In Brittany there was no other girl so beautiful / or so courteous [courtly]: / she was gracious and well-schooled / both in manner and in speech). When the knight Gurun, who eventually woos her, first meets Fresne, “Mut la vit bele e enseignee, / Sage, curteise e afeitee” (He saw her, very beautiful and well brought-up, / wise, courteous [courtly] and well-bred).\textsuperscript{103} The continuity of the practice of fostering is testified to in the fourteenth-century Middle English version. After Fresne is taken into the abbey, “The abbesse hir gan teche and beld” (the abbess began to teach and edify her). In a detail new to the later version, Fresne is at least twelve when Gurun begins his attentions and she leaves the nunnery. At the poem’s close, Fresne’s mother admits that she had Fresne sent off “In a convent yfostered to be” (to be fostered in a convent).\textsuperscript{104} Similarly, Chaucer’s portrait of the Prioress, though satirical, highlights the kinds of learning that could be modeled and taught by nuns: Madame Eglyntyne can sing the divine service well, learned Anglo-Norman according to “the scole [school] of Stratford atte Bowe,” and practices good table manners and social etiquette.\textsuperscript{105}

In the earliest two centuries of our time period, Latin would have been the language of instruction in literacy—though French would also have been a mother tongue for many nuns—and the royal Anglo-Saxon foundations had excellent reputations for turning out women highly literate in Latin. Records exist of many royal and aristocratic girls having been sent to the venerable Benedictine convent Wilton Abbey, including Gunnhild, daughter of Harold Godwinson (d. 1066). Others included Matilda (b. 1080) and Mary of Scotland (b. 1082), daughters of

\textsuperscript{101}Power, \textit{Medieval English Nunneries}, 277–78. Because nuns came primarily from the upper classes and were well positioned to have received a good education, either in their own homes or in nunneries, they in turn could have provided a good education to their students.

\textsuperscript{102}Power, \textit{Medieval English Nunneries}, 255–60.


St. Margaret and Malcolm III of Scotland. Matilda earned such a reputation for her learning at Wilton that William of Malmesbury called her “litteris quoque.”


Matilda earned such a reputation for her learning at Wilton that William of Malmesbury called her “litteris quoque.”

---

106 Loïs Honeycutt, Matilda of Scotland: A Study in Medieval Queenship (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2003), 18.
foemineum pectus exercuit” (trained in letters as well as what it means to be a woman). Wilton also counted among its members the “inclyta versificatrix” (celebrated poetess) Muriel (fl. abt. 1050), who would likely have composed in Latin. Barking Abbey, like Wilton, was a large and powerful women’s house established in the Anglo-Saxon period. In the centuries after the conquest, it possessed an excellent reputation for learning and Latin literacy as well as an extensive library. A Barking nun, for example, adroitly translated and adapted Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Vita Sancti Eduardi, regis et confessoris* into the Anglo-Norman *Vie d’Edouard* in the 1160s, and one of her sisters, Clemence, did the same for a life of St. Katherine of Alexandria two or three decades later. Cecily de Chanvill, for example, abbess

---


110 On the Life of St. Edward, see Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 62; and Wogan-Browne, “‘Invisible Archives?’,” 659–62. On Clemence of Barking, see Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, trans. and ed., *Anchoritic*
between 1170 and 1180 of the royally-founded Benedictine nunnery of Elstow in Bedfordshire, commissioned a copy of Peter Comestor’s *Historia scholastica* and Richard of St. Victor’s *Allegoriae in Vetus Testamentum*. A Latin inscription in the manuscript remarks that she had it made “in eruditionem et profectum conventus sui et ceterorum insipientium” (for the teaching and advancement of her convent, and of anyone else who examines it). Finally, among the evidence must also be counted a twelfth-century manuscript from St. Mary’s, Winchester (Nunnaminster). The colophon identifies that a female scribe copied out the manuscript, which contains Latin texts. It is the only English manuscript found to date to be definitively copied out by a nun (though this indicates scarce survival, not that others weren’t copied), though extant likely female scribal work has been proposed elsewhere.

After the thirteenth century, Latin literacy appears to have declined substantially at many houses—though not all. David Bell observes that Dartford Priory in Kent, the only Dominican house for nuns in England, “was well known locally as a place of education and was certainly offering instruction in Latin as late as the last decades of the fifteenth century.” A 1481 entry in the Registers of the Masters-General of the Dominican order records, for example, permission given to Sister Jane Fitzhugh of Dartford Priory to bring in a master to teach her and other “gentlewomen” at Latin and grammar. French continued to be taught and used heavily in English nunneries even after it was superseded by English as the most common vernacular language in use. Further, from the late 1200s on, more material survives to tell us about what medieval English nuns read and what educational pursuits they undertook and offered—though even so, we do not have a complete picture. Manuscripts, printed books, and records have survived from about 45 percent of the 144 women’s houses.

From his essential study reconstructing these libraries, David Bell argues that nunneries provided more education, particularly in Latin and especially in the first centuries after the Conquest, than Power and Orme presumed. His inventory reveals a wide range of reading material, particularly in wealthier houses that could afford...
numerous and luxurious books. Much Latin material appears in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries much more in French, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries nearly all books are in English. In content the material ranges from the expected liturgical and biblical material, representing about half of all the surviving manuscripts and books, as well as spiritual treatises, theological studies, hagiography, patristics, lives of the fathers, histories, chronicles, literary works by such authors as Chaucer, Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, and Giovanni Boccaccio, and such texts as Aesop’s *Fables* and works by Aristotle and Cicero.117

David Bell’s analysis reveals that more than two-thirds of these books date from after 1400 and, taking out the liturgical volumes that make up much of the libraries, more than two-thirds of the books are in English.118 The library of Syon Abbey, about which much is known, helpfully illustrates these numbers. The Syon library had separate collections: a “brethrenes librarie,” a “sisterenes librarie,” and books for common use.119 A calculation using Bell’s inventory reveals the brothers’ library was about 98 percent in Latin, contrasted with the sisters’ library, about 62 percent in Latin.120 Of the sisters’ forty-eight books, twenty-five are liturgical and twenty-three nonliturgical. Five of the latter are in Latin, one in French, and seventeen in English. It must be noted that of course these numbers can be misleading, as the size of the libraries was fluid and records are incomplete; we do not know what has been lost over time.121 With this and other analysis of the inventories, Bell persuasively demonstrates the falloff in Latin literacy among most nuns: “There can be little doubt that from the fourteenth century onwards most nuns would not have been able to read and understand a non-liturgical text in Latin.”122 Yet a shift away from Latin did not mean a lack of devotion: as demonstrated by the titles in the Syon catalogue, much spiritual and devotional material for women (both nuns and laywomen) was produced in both English and French.123 In sending their children to nunneries, a practice continued up to the Dissolution, families could rest assured of the spiritual formation of those children, as well as a general education, albeit one generally moving away from sophisticated training in Latin.

---

117Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 34.
118Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 71, 75.
120For the indexing of Syon’s libraries, see Bell, *What Nuns Read*, part II.
122Bell, *What Nuns Read*, 77.
123As early as the 1220s affective devotional materials written for women in English and French appeared in the West Midlands (the *Ancrene Wisse*, Katherine Group, and Wooing Group texts); many of these texts eventually appear in books owned by or produced for nunneries as well. On this, see Bella Millett, ed., *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with Variants from Other Manuscript*, 2 vols., EETS o.s. 325, 326 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005–2006).
Elementary Schools

While girls might sometimes join boys at song school (the evidence is uncertain, especially until the fifteenth century), girls were certainly able to attend small, informal elementary schools, the forerunners of the early modern dame school, outside of their own homes, and Adamson notes that girls may have joined in modest classes taught by parish priests, parish clerks, and chantry priests. While many of these elementary schools were located in towns, the countryside also had its share, providing access to both urban and rural dwellers. Few documentary records survive for these elementary schools before the fifteenth century, though literary evidence does. The earliest appears in two texts written for anchoresses, avowed female religious recluses who, in eleventh- and twelfth-century England usually came to the anchoritic life from the nunery, or in the thirteenth century and beyond were often upper-class laywomen. Anchoresses lived in small solitary dwellings, usually attached to the sides of churches, though references in anchoritic guidebooks make clear that the solitary life was an ideal. In reality, the anchorhold could be something of a social crossroads, with many visitors, disturbances, and distractions; and anchoresses, like nuns, were sought after as teachers.

Aelred of Rievaulx, in his De institutione inclusarum (On the Instruction of Anchoresses), written around 1160-62 for his sister, advises her not to teach children as some anchoresses do: “Pueris et puellis nullum ad te concedas accessum. Sunt quaedam inclusae, quae in docendis puellis occupantur, et cellam suam vertunt in scholam” (Allow neither boy nor girl near you. There are anchoresses who are busy teaching girls, and turn their anchorhold into schools). Sixty years later, the anonymous author of the massively popular vernacular handbook Ancrene Wisse, written for three sisters who wished to undertake the anchoritic life, gave the same advice:

Ancre ne schal nout forwurðe scolmeistre, ne turnen hire ancre hus to childrene scole. Hire meiden mei þauh techen sum lutel meiden þet were dute of fortu leornen among gromes, auh ancre ne ouh fortu þemen bute god one.127

(An anchoress shall not become a schoolmistress, nor turn her anchor-house into a children’s school. Her maid, though, may teach some little girl fearful of being taught among boys, but an anchoress ought to be devoted to God alone.)

That these anchoresses were all carefully advised not to teach indicated a demand for teachers for girls. That the anchoresses, and their maids, could be looked to as teachers themselves meant that these women had been educated, possibly robustly, as they often came from families with the means and station to provide tutors, or were educated as nuns. There are further indications in the Ancrene Wisse text and surviving
manuscripts as well that these anchoresses would have been able to understand some Latin, had some training in writing, and shared books in textual communities. No wonder they were so attractive as teachers that the author had to offer a corrective to an unsanctioned practice.

More diverse evidence of coeducation in elementary schools survives in the latter half of this period. Notably, the parliamentary statute of 1406 protects the right of children to education: "Chacun homme ou femme de quel estat ou condition qil soit, soit faunc de mettre son fitz ou fille de son estat ou condition que leur ples deinz le Roialme" (Each man or woman of whatever estate or condition that he be, be free to set his son or daughter to obtain learning at whichever kind of school that pleases him within the Realm). Scholars disagree about what exactly school meant, with some, such as Power, uncertain how to interpret the term and others, such as Caroline M. Barron, contending that "the statute should be read as an indication that girls were being educated and had complete access to apprenticeships." Adamson remarks that "Dapprendre lettereure' describes exactly the function of the medieval grammar school. References to women as professional teachers appear more frequently in records near the end of the Middle Ages. The register of the guild of Corpus Christi in Boston, Lincolnshire, records, for example, admittance to the guild in 1404 of Matilda Maresflete, listed as “magistra scolarum” (schoolmistress) of the school. Two women of London are listed in a 1408 will and a 1441 tax roll as having the last name “Schoolmistress.” To this group David Bell adds Alice Whytingstale, mistress of the school at the abbey of Romsey in 1502. Orme remarks that “these mistresses are likely to have taught small girls, and some male teachers may have done the same.” Hanawalt has gathered some additional evidence of these elementary schools:

William Cresewyk, a grocer, left 20 s. to a “scholemaystersse” in 1406. The fraternity of St. Nicholas recorded the name of Agnes, doctrix puellarum, among its members. Alice Reigner, an illegitimate daughter of a corn dealer, was to have 1 mark a year toward her education. William Rouse, a mercer, left nine children

---

when he died in 1486. Each of his children, four boys and five girls, were entrusted to William Mylburne, a painter, “to find them to school honestly for four years next after my decease.” A chandler’s daughter attended school from age eight to thirteen at a cost of 25s. for fees. Other evidence indicates an education of four or five years for girls. Only two of the orphan girls entered nunneries, but they would certainly have had an education.136

For comparison, records show women held similar positions in France as schoolteachers, instructing pupils even in Latin; a 1380 reference records the cantor of Notre Dame calling together his teachers, including the “honestis mulieribus scholas in arte grammatica regentibus et tenentibus” (distinguished women teaching and holding grammar schools).137 M. Charles Jourdain identified a 1484 teaching license granted by the cantor to Perrette la Couppenoire, in part “docendique et instruendi puellas in bonis moribus, litteris grammaticalibus ac alis licitis et honestis” (teaching and instructing girls in good morals, grammar, and other things lawful and honorable).138

Despite these examples, on balance the evidence is lamentably much less than we would wish. In any case, as Power asserts, “Elementary education cannot have been widespread. . . . Nor is it likely that the curriculum was a wide one.”139 That elementary education outside of the formal path of schooling was available to girls is clear, yet at present, we do not understand the practice in great detail.

**Apprenticeship and Employment**

While the educational settings discussed so far were employed either in preparation for aristocratic life or as a means to educate the daughters of the rising bourgeoisie, the final setting considered here was utilized most frequently by a class of women not yet much discussed: the emerging middle class and working women, whether urban or rural dwellers. These women, especially the financially poorest, whose families could not afford to provide a dowry for marriage or the religious life, had greater need to support themselves economically, whether they married or not. Learning skills and perhaps a craft or trade was a critical endeavor for girls as preparation for making a living as adults, whether to support themselves or their male relatives. Whether it was brewing and selling, weaving, cloth-making, dyeing, baking, ironmongery, trade, shopkeeping, inn-keeping, or innumerable other occupations, women began to acquire these skills in childhood.140 As discussed earlier, girls could and

---

139Power, Medieval Women, 84.
did learn a variety of skills and occupations in the domestic setting—in their own homes from their parents, in other homes while employed as domestic workers, or at nunneries if sent there (less likely for the working classes).

To prepare for earning a living in crafts and trades, girls were also sent away to apprenticeships, under indenture for various lengths of time (seven years was common, though this term varied) in other homes or workshops, at typically between twelve and fourteen years of age. In such settings, girls would have learned the necessary skills as well as attained some kind of social and moral education, as an apprentice master was responsible for general formation of the child as well as professional training. London records provide some of the best evidence of girls’ apprenticeships from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. While the information cannot be generalized across all of England, Stephanie R. Hovland’s observation about numbers helps to contextualize: if the number of court cases involving apprentices is an accurate reflection, about 10 percent of apprentices in London, or about three hundred in any given year, were girls. They came from all over England, from the gentry and merchant classes. Many were orphans who came with bequests, and significantly more apprentices entered indentures following the plague of the mid-fourteenth century.

It is more difficult to discuss apprenticeship in the first half of the period, but it is easier for the second half with the increase in record-keeping and the flourishing of the practice with the growth of urban centers. Orme observes that “in the sphere of trade and craft, the word ‘apprentice’ with its implication of ‘learning’ had been current in English since at least 1300, and in French even earlier, but the fifteenth century appears to see an enlargement of the notion.” Power observes that various guild orders (as she argues, for economic reasons) limited the involvement of girls and women to working for men in their own family; this also, as she notes, indicates that girls and women were relied on heavily for a variety of guild work. Records reveal too that “femmes couvertes, practising crafts by themselves, could take women apprentices.” Wills also preserve evidence that fathers could and did leave money to their daughters as either dowries for marriage or religious vocation, or funds for learning a trade.

Various statutes also affirm that girls undertook apprenticeships. The parliamentary statute of 1406, for example, continued statutes from the previous century, imposed under Edward III and Richard II, regarding parents who wanted to send both sons and daughters out as apprentices. As discussed earlier, though, the statute does not restrict the right “d’apprendre letteure” (“to obtain learning”) for all children. The statute also reveals that both men and women could take on apprentices: “nulle home ou femme rescyeve ascun apprentice acontindre de cest ordinance sur

---


143 Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 217. For an excellent discussion of the many examples of female apprentices in London from the late medieval period, see Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, 35–44.


paine de paier au Roy C.s.” (“no man nor woman receive any apprentice contrary to this ordinance, on pain of paying to the king 100 shillings”).  

Other legal regards and assize rolls preserve examples of these apprenticeships, often when there were complaints. Power relates several examples of such, including the fourteenth-century court case of a girl illegally apprenticed to William and Elena Brewer of Holborn. In 1364, Agnes, wife of a London cutler, took on an apprentice named Jusema. In 1376, William and Johanna Kaly agreed to particular terms of an apprenticeship for a girl named Agnes Cook.  

It is particularly important to note that the skills we perhaps most associate with education in the modern age, reading and writing, were taught to some girls in these groups, especially when such skills were needed to carry out a trade. Bookbinding, for example, necessitated the writing of quire marks, and businesses of most kinds required some kind of record- or bookkeeping. This literacy did not demand advanced reading knowledge of Latin but instead required the ability to read and write some French or English. (Unlike the upper classes, the middle and lower classes would not have necessarily turned to scribes for keeping their records, though more well-to-do business people might have employed a scribe to help with correspondence and the like.) In 1420, for example, orphaned sisters Alice and Matilda Shaw were apprenticed to Master Peter Church, a notary public. Hanawalt notes that “presumably they had some writing skills before they were apprenticed.” Steven Justice makes a case for “recognition literacy” in an age when written record-keeping became increasingly important, suggesting that even without the ability to read at more than a rudimentary level, many would have been able to recognize and thus leverage various forms of documents, such as legal writs.  

The final group to consider under this heading of education in preparation for employment is perhaps the largest group of girls and women in medieval society: laborers. As Power notes, this was the “largest class of working women, peasants and dwellers on all manors scattered up and down England.” These were the women living rurally who were a pivotal part of the workforce bringing in harvests, running personal households, and sometimes managing some of their own lands. Their work was intense and often deeply practical. Apart from the basic prayers all children would have been taught, and the stories and teachings they would have learned from hearing, these women were unlikely to have received much further education, despite the fourteenth-century statutory protection granting all children the right to learning. There would simply have been little time, and less money, given how unnecessary more advanced literacy skills would have been for earning a living. Certainly, exceptional children existed who wanted a greater degree of education, yet most daughters of laborers were likely to have received primarily moral and social,
rather than literary, education. Power considers that this group of women “was perhaps the most hardworked class of all. In every manorial survey one will find a certain number of women as free tenants, villeins or cotters, holding their virgate of few acres like men,” and doing much of the work of hiring out what they could not do themselves. Women could be employed externally as well to do much of the same work as men: “We find in manorial accounts women hired by the bailiff to do all sorts of agricultural labor. In fact there was hardly any work except ploughing for which they were not engaged.”¹⁵³ The daughters of these women would have been learning and training from an early age to prepare for homekeeping, directing or helping in agricultural labor, and any other needs of their anticipated future.

Conclusion

All things considered, the education that girls received was not so different from boys of their same socioeconomic group, with some exceptions, such as military training, the highest clerical pursuits, or university education. Girls could be quite highly educated, even in some of the liberal arts; much depended on both their socioeconomic class as well as what they needed to know for their adult lives. It is important to remember as well that, as Orme argues, much of the evidence we have is written by men and seen through their eyes: “Men concentrated on the aspects of ladies’ education which they themselves preferred, and ignored the others. . . . In fact, a noble lady whether a married woman or a nun shared much of the knowledge and many of the accomplishments of her husband or brothers.”¹⁵⁴ Women of the merchant and working classes, too, could enjoy educational achievement and professional success. From the mid-eleventh century to the late fifteenth century, the concept and content of education had been slowly metamorphosing. At the beginning of this period, girls were educated in a primarily domestic setting or that of a nunnery, but by the end of the fifteenth century, a strong sense of “going to school” had evolved, especially for aristocratic boys but reaching increasingly into other classes. Women as well as men were undertaking the paid profession of schoolmaster or schoolmistress, the concept of a set school day was in motion, and textbooks were more commonly and widely written for broader and broader use. By the sixteenth century, treatises began to appear seeking to establish a more formal curriculum for study and some additional interest in educating women to a high degree.¹⁵⁵ With boys and girls more commonly in the classroom together, the profession of schoolmaster and schoolmistress becoming solidified, and the attention to schooling increasing, the stage was set for these sometimes separate educational paths to merge more fully into our modern concept of children’s education.

¹⁵³Power, Medieval Women, 71.

¹⁵⁴Orme, From Childhood to Chivalry, 212–13. Orme notes that one of the ways in which women exceeded men in education was in artistic work; one way in which men exceeded women was in the ability to receive explicit formal education and in greater training for literary composition and personal scribal work (though, I will add, some women certainly could write).

¹⁵⁵Orme, From Childhood to Chivalry, 216–20, 224–35.
Megan J. Hall is assistant director at the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. She wishes to thank the Medieval Institute and the Hesburgh Libraries, particularly Dr. Julia Schneider, for their gracious research and development support. Lastly, she would like to pay her gratitude and respects to Michael Clanchy, who was a tremendous scholar of medieval literacy and a generous encourager of her work.