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**Work as a Manifestation of Faith in the English Nunnery:
Barking Abbey, Essex**

Terri Barnes

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This paper discusses various occupations held by nuns in the late-medieval and early-modern English convent, and argues that while the nuns did have extraordinary opportunities for self-management when compared to secular women, nuns carried out those responsibilities in part as extensions and expressions of their faith. This paper looks at offices held by the nuns at Barking Abbey in Essex, from the late Medieval period up to the Abbey's dissolution in the sixteenth century as a result of the shifting political and religious sands under King Henry VIII. Barking Abbey was a large, wealthy institution that needed capable administration, and for its officer-nuns this meant high levels of responsibility. Though management opportunities may have garnered respect for the women, this paper asserts that any work the nuns did was seen in the light of centuries-old monastic traditions that viewed labor as both a way to ensure their institution's survival and a way to get closer to God.

Historians have generally regarded the late Medieval and Early Modern periods in England as a time when women of higher social status had two “occupational” options: marriage or the convent. If married, the primary job of an elite woman was to provide heirs, preferably male, in order to continue her husband’s family line. For women of the gentry classes, life choices hinged on their father’s ability to raise a dowry large enough to enable them to marry. If only a small dowry could be raised, a young woman would likely find herself “married” to the church and in a life spent behind cloister walls. But where opportunities to work and achieve were concerned, this option may have been the best of all, for it was inside the nunnery where women gained a level of education, authority, and responsibility that was unmatched by most of their secular sisters.¹

¹ Lina Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500* (Cambridge, 1896, reissued, New York: Russell & Russell, 1963); Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275-1535* (Cambridge, 1922, reissued, New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1964).

The story of women's work and opportunities for responsibility during this period is one of both continuity and change. In secular English society, the types of work women did changed little; it was simply taken for granted that they tended primarily to the basic functions necessary to keep the household and farm running such as baking, brewing, sewing, and tending to children and domestic animals. In towns women might find other opportunities as domestic servants, cloth makers, innkeepers, or in selling food and drink. Change came during the post-plague period after 1350 when there was an increase in opportunities for women because there were more jobs than hands to do them. For those who did find additional work, it was widely accepted that they were paid less than men, largely (still) limited to the more menial jobs men did not want, and as Marjorie McIntosh notes, all work had to "be accommodated to their biological, economic, and social roles within the domestic context."² Any extra work had to fit within a woman's regular duties as mother and wife. But from around 1500 women in England began to be squeezed out of the labor market as increasing populations meant more men competed for the available jobs.³ Judith Bennett in particular has argued that while there was continuity in the availability of low-wage, menial jobs women could perform in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, changes in economy and society saw an erosion of even those opportunities by the sixteenth century.⁴

But for women who chose a monastic life the story was different. Both Merry Wiesner and Valerie Spear have shown that personal empowerment could be found in the convent, and that abbesses in

2 Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 251.

3 Jacqueline Eales, *Women in early modern England, 1500-1700* (London: University College London Press, 1998), chapter 8.

4 Eales, 74; Maryanne Kowaleski and Judith M. Bennett, "Crafts, Gilds, and Women in the Middle Ages," in *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, eds. Judith M. Bennett, Elizabeth A. Clark, Jean F. O'Barr, B. Anne Vilen, and Sarah Westphal-Wihl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 11-25, and Bennett's work on female brewers in England in *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

particular were some of the most independent and powerful women in late-medieval and early-modern Europe.⁵ Roberta Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva also found the nuns who managed communities in Norfolk and Suffolk enjoyed more independence than secular women.⁶ Nuns who held the various offices in the convent wielded broad authority and achieved a level of autonomy in handling their own affairs that put them on a par with women of *femme sole* status.⁷ Though many convents had assistance from outside the house, it was the nuns themselves who were primarily responsible for the daily administration of their community. To add to this discussion, here we investigate the offices held at the Benedictine nunnery of Barking Abbey in Essex, England. There we find that the nuns who lived and prayed in that community were, out of practical necessity, masterful at combining the active and contemplative life. Barking in the late Medieval and Early Modern periods was a large, wealthy⁸ institution holding more than 1,000 acres and manors in several counties, and housing between thirty and forty nuns and novices, all of which needed capable administration. For the abbey's officer-nuns, this meant high levels of authority and responsibility, as it took considerable effort to see that life inside such a busy closed environment was carried out as smoothly as possible for everyone, and surviving account books attest to their diligence.

However, though there were plenty of options for self-management for the women of Barking Abbey, as will be

5 Valerie G. Spear, *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005); Merry Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), chapter 6.

6 Roberta Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia: History and Archaeology c. 1100-1540* (Norwich: Center for East Anglian Studies, University of East Anglia, 1993), 17.

7 Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1983), 8; Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 63.

8 In the sixteenth century valued at £862 net annual income, which had the buying power of more than £265,000 in 2011. It was the third wealthiest nunnery in England at its dissolution in 1539.

demonstrated, this paper argues that many women became nuns there primarily through religious vocation, and that work and responsibility were viewed by them as necessary extensions of their faith. Simply put, for the nuns work was a form of prayer. In order to pursue a life devoted to Christ they had to take responsibility for sustaining their community themselves. As Eileen Power observed, a monastery was primarily a house of prayer, but it was also

From a social point of view, a community of human beings, who require to be fed and clothed; it is often a landowner on a large scale; it maintains a more or less elaborate household of servants and dependents; it runs a home farm; it buys and sells and keeps accounts. The nun must perforce combine the functions of Martha and Mary.⁹

In Benedictine monasteries the idea that work or manual labor is not only required for material existence, but is necessary to serve the soul can be traced back to Saint Benedict himself. Chapter forty-eight of his *Rule*, written in the sixth century, specifically addresses how labor combats idleness, which is “an enemy to the soul.” Work therefore is spiritual, as it must serve the soul.¹⁰ Working could also serve the soul by assisting it toward salvation. According to the abbess Petronilla, “Often putting aside the glory of reading and prayers, we turn to management of temporal goods for the advantage of our successors, which indeed we do for this reason: that when we are sleeping in our tombs, we may be helped by their prayers before God.”¹¹ As Power stated above, the mixing of work and spiritual matters meant combining Martha and Mary whose story is recounted in the gospel of Luke. When Jesus visits their home, Martha complains that she does all the work while her sister Mary sits listening at the Lord’s feet, thus beginning the tension between

9 Power, 131.

10 Leodegar Hunkeler, O.S.B., *It Began With Benedict. The Benedictines: Their Background, Founder, History, Life, Contributions to Church and World*, trans. Luke Eberle, O.S.B. (Oregon: Mt. Angel Abbey, 1978), 64.

11 Bruce L. Venarde, *Women’s Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997), 118.

the “active” and “contemplative” life.¹² This was not only felt by those choosing the regular life, but by the lay community as well. R.N. Swanson states the struggle between the spiritual and temporal was constant for all late-medieval Christians.¹³ To alleviate that tension a compromise had to be reached which was probably best articulated by Walter Hilton, himself an Augustinian, when he wrote on how a layman could live the mixed life. He suggested in the late-fourteenth century that a Christian could live an ordinary life in the world with all their possessions and responsibilities but that they should approach that life in a contemplative manner. This is daily life *as* prayer where one’s work in the world becomes “part of his spiritual quest.”¹⁴ Being a perfect Christian thus meant living a seamless integration of the active and contemplative regardless of whether one had professed monastic vows.

Claire Walker has shown that nuns indeed subscribed to this concept of the “mixed life,” as they saw no dichotomy in the Martha/Mary story. She has found several examples of early-modern Benedictines who viewed their work as a form of prayer, including one nun who saw cleaning the pigsty as a form of devotion.¹⁵ Walker echoes Power when she claims, “every nun was both Mary and Martha.”¹⁶ This belief in work as an expression of faith was not exclusive to the Benedictine Order, but was part of other monastic traditions as well. In the sixteenth century we find Saint Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun, famously instructing a prioress by telling her “if you have to be employed in domestic duties, as for instance in the kitchen, remember that the Lord goes about among the pots and

12 Luke 10:38-42.

13 R.N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215-1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 105.

14 Swanson, 106.

15 Claire Walker, “Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in Seventeenth-Century English Cloisters,” in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 30 (1999), 417.

16 Walker, 398, 417.

pans, helping you in all things.”¹⁷ The Carthusians also saw work as a means to glorify God. Two chapters of their Rule specifically speak of work as “a service that unites us to Christ.”¹⁸ Even today, Carthusian nuns are urged to see any menial task, whether washing dishes or tending the garden, as “an expression of their union with the Son of God in his love for the Father and for all men.”¹⁹ Monastic labor had many meanings; it was economical and practical, but importantly, it was also moral and spiritual. God and His will were to be sought everywhere, even in one’s daily chores. Nuns did not dichotomize the Martha/Mary story, but rather their Christian traditions taught them that worldly and spiritual work were one in the same, the former being an extension and expression of the latter.

Nuns also could look to Scripture for evidence of the spiritual importance of work, such as expressed in 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12:

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. . . For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.²⁰

Barking Abbey was a learned community, and in the Early Modern period its nuns possessed at least two Bibles, one written in English which the Crown had given them permission to use in

17 “Saint Teresa of Avila, *The History of Her Foundations*, Chapter III, translated by Sr. Agnes Mason, C.H.F.,” accessed 21 June 2011, <http://www.umilta.net/teresavila.html>

18 Book 1, Chapter 5.4 in “Statutes of the Carthusian Order,” accessed 22 June 2011, <http://www.chartreux.org>

19 “Nuns in the Charterhouse of Notre Dame,” accessed 22 June 2011, <http://www.chartreux.org>

20 Additional examples are found in 1 Corinthians 15:58, 1 Timothy 5:8, Colossians 3:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:11.

the early-fifteenth century.²¹ So, in this verse the nuns could read for themselves a clear connection between the word of God and their Benedictine values of self-sustenance and rejection of idleness through their own labor. Additionally, work was (and is) connected to charity which is an important Christian virtue. Christ had implored his followers to love their neighbors as they loved themselves, which created a sacred obligation to provide for others through honest labor:

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35).

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need (Ephesians 4:28).

Chapter four of Benedict's *Rule* required the nuns to provide charity, and through their labors the nuns fulfilled this obligation, making worldly work profoundly sacred. Centuries of Christian and monastic traditions had taught them to view the active and contemplative, or temporal and spiritual, as not mutually exclusive but rather inextricably linked parts of a whole.

Once the call to the religious life had been answered a nun and her sisters had no choice but to see to the survival of their community through faith and hard work. The hierarchy among the women in Barking Abbey that made this possible consisted of two levels: those who oversaw the institution's administration, the abbess and prioress, and those women working under them called obedientiaries with specific functions or "obediencies." This system was the same as that used in male Benedictine houses.²² These "officers" were the women responsible for the efficient management of the household

21 Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1920, reprinted 1966), 334-7.

22 Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain 1000-1300* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), 249-52; Winifrid M. Sturman, "Barking Abbey: A Study in its external and internal administration from the Conquest to the Dissolution," (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1961), 352.

on a day-to-day basis, and recent scholarship has shown when compared to their male counterparts they generally performed just as well even considering the challenges they faced that were beyond their control, such as fire, flood, pestilence, war, increases in taxes, and economic downturns. Additionally, when comparing them to women outside convent walls what we learn is that nuns did not have to accommodate their occupations within a domestic context, as McIntosh has noted about secular women.²³ Nuns did not have spouses and children to consider, and their social status and credit-worthiness were not dependent on their husband's. McIntosh also argues that society might view secular women who did business on their own as "inappropriately independent," because they were not restrained by a husband or father, which could lead to "verbal or sexual excess."²⁴ But for nuns their veil and exalted status as religious elites protected them from these types of accusations. They were free to do the work required of them to sustain their communities, as indeed they did. In her study of nunneries in the Norwich diocese, Marilyn Oliva found no evidence for "gross mismanagement."²⁵ Nancy Bradley Warren, in her analysis of English Brigittines and Minoreesses, also found that the nuns were very effective in managing their households and maintaining business relationships with their surrounding communities.²⁶ Studies of Barking Abbey have reached the same conclusions.

Though many English nunneries were well run, not all nuns were equally skilled managers. And this subject of mismanagement does raise the issue of overall decline inside monastic institutions, especially in the early years of the sixteenth century leading up to the Dissolution. Many such as David Knowles, Eamon Duffy, Robert

23 McIntosh, 251.

24 McIntosh, 251.

25 Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350-1540* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), 101.

26 Warren, chapter 3.

Dunning, and Joan Greatrex have argued for monastic vitality and viability. But critics like Geoffrey Dickens and Barrie Dobson suggest some houses were in a deplorable state, with lax discipline and religious devotion.²⁷

As with most things in life, the truth is more nuanced and cannot be generalized. It depends on studying each institution separately. How then does one gauge if a monastery was in a state of decline? Episcopal and royal visitation records are two sources, but they are fraught with danger. In both, inquisitors were looking for misbehavior and mismanagement instead of what was working well, which often led to the airing of petty grievances not indicative of the house's overall condition. If they did receive the *omnia bene*, it could mean all was well, or it could also mean things were terrible but none of the nuns wanted to speak up.²⁸ Unfortunately, the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* which reported the findings of visitations in the mid-1530s has been lost for Essex. Therefore, it is difficult to say how steadfast in their devotions the nuns at Barking were at the very end of the abbey's history.

However, thirty years prior to its dissolution Bishop Fitzjames of London visited Barking, and the record of that visitation makes no mention of negligence where the daily offices and prayers were concerned.²⁹ Since many of the same nuns were still there at the end, it is possible to assume continued good behavior. And this points to another area where we might find evidence of deterioration; it could be signaled by a drop in the number of nuns and novices over time. But at Barking Abbey we find a steady group hovering between thirty and forty women from roughly 1400 to the dissolution in 1539. Finally, we may look to the relationships with patrons for

27 Joan Greatrex, "After Knowles: Recent Perspectives in Monastic History," in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. James G. Clark (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), 36-9.

28 Greatrex, 37-8.

29 Sturman, 472-3.

evidence of problems. Surely families would not continue to send their daughters to become nuns at Barking, or request burial there and prayers for their souls, or bequeath funds for the abbey's buildings if they thought the place unworthy. But surviving wills prove they did all of these things right up to the abbey's end.³⁰ Therefore, at Barking Abbey we find an institution that was not in decline, but spiritually and economically vital in its last 150 years.

In Benedictine nunneries the chief executive officer was the abbess. Among the household's offices there was no higher authority. The *Rule of Saint Benedict* required that

An abbess that may be hable & worthy to take vpon hir the Rule & gouernance of a monastery or congregacion / must all wey call to hir remembraunce & consydre the name of the dignite that she is called by / and labour effectually that hir dedes be accordinge to hir name / and in nothings contrary to the dignite that she is called / for she occupieth the place of almighty god: in the monastery.³¹

As the leader and spiritual mother, her position was the most important in the institution, and her job required a high level of skill in organization and administration. Due to Barking's size, the abbess' rights and responsibilities were so extensive that had she been male, she would have been a Lord in Parliament, as her brethren abbots were.³² As a significant landholder, she was one of only four English abbesses to hold baronial status.³³ Her prominent position meant the election of a new abbess after the death or resignation of her predecessor was a formal and serious affair. To be qualified for the job, one had to be of legitimate birth, good reputation, and at least

30 E.A. Loftus and H.F. Chettle, *A History of Barking Abbey* (Barking: Wilson & Whitworth, Ltd., 1954), 49; Sturman, 412.

31 *Here begyneth the Rule of seynt Benet*: Richard Fox's translation of the Benedictine Rule for women, 1517, printed in *Female Monastic Life in Early Tudor England*, ed. Barry Collett (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 90; Sturman, 430.

32 Loftus and Chettle, 43-5.

33 The other three were Shaftesbury, Wilton, and Saint Mary's Winchester. Eckenstein, 365; Power, 185; Warren, 61.

twenty-one years of age.³⁴ Barking Abbey, which did have a long history of elite and royal women as abbesses, also had abbesses and obedientiaris who were not from titled aristocracy, showing that for at least some of its nuns competency, rather than social status, may have been the overriding factor in their election to office.

The majority of the abbess' duties revolved around the legal and financial responsibilities of the estate. A chief financial responsibility was the administration of the general funds of the house. These funds were derived from leases of demesne lands from the abbey's fifteen manors, the lease of Barking mill, rents in the town of Barking, and collection of taxes. As well, the fund received payments in kind of grain, produce, wood, and hay.³⁵ These goods and cash were used by the abbess' obedientiaris for the daily management of the house. Legally, the abbess was required to provide the king with men at arms in times of war, maintain a prison, and hold manorial courts which happened usually every three weeks.³⁶ She was also required to handle any litigation in which the abbey found itself, and with multiple tenants, the opportunities (as with most monasteries of this stature) were frequent.³⁷ In addition to her responsibility for the estate at large, the abbess also saw to the administration of her own private house which was separate from the other nuns. Her household had its own kitchen and cook, as well as several personal servants.³⁸ Barking's last abbess left in her will money and goods to no fewer than six personal servants.³⁹

The house was not a perquisite merely for the abbess' own enjoyment. Winifred Sturman points out that children mentioned in

34 Oliva, *The Convent and the Community*, 77; Power, 45.

35 E 101/458/7; Sturman, 227.

36 Loftus and Chettle, 53.

37 Loftus and Chettle, 53.

38 Sturman, 266.

39 *The Will of Dorothy Barley, the last abbess, 1556*, printed in Sturman, appendix III.

Barking's records as wards of the abbey were probably being raised by the abbess in her household.⁴⁰ Money payments were recorded as received by the abbey for the board and education of young children in both the early-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries. Edmund and Jasper Tudor, as small boys aged five and six, were placed in the custody of the abbess of Barking from about 1437 to 1440, and Sir John Stanley directed in his will of 1528 that his son and heir be placed in the abbess's care at Barking until he reached age twelve. Sir John paid handsomely for this service which included £35 annually for bed, board, education, and any expenses incurred by the boy and his servants.⁴¹

With an eight hundred-year history of patronage and relationships with the elite of Essex and neighboring counties, we must assume those were not the only instances of families trusting the abbess with their children, particularly when Bede, in the abbey's very early history, recounted the story of a boy "who by reason of his infant age, was bred up among the virgins dedicated to God [at Barking Abbey], and there to pursue his studies."⁴² Serving as a guardian of children was just another of the many duties with which the abbess was charged. Clearly, her residence served many purposes, not the least of which was as the abbey's administrative center. With such multifaceted responsibilities, the abbess was somewhat akin to a woman running a small company in the twenty-first century.

At Barking, the prioress was hand-picked by the abbess and second to her in executive importance.⁴³ While the abbess was somewhat removed and busy with the secular, financial, and

40 Sturman, 267.

41 Loftus and Chettle, 47, 50; £35 had the purchasing power equivalent to £11,273 in 2011. See "Currency Converter," The National Archives, accessed 24 April 2011, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency>.

42 The Venerable Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1951), 176-77.

43 Eckenstein, 370; In smaller monasteries dependent on a great abbey, the prioress served as head of the house. See Essex Record Office, hereafter ERO, publication no. 41, *Essex Monasteries* (Chelmsford: Essex City Council and ERO, 1964), 17.

legal matters of the convent, the prioress saw to the day-to-day administration of the house. She held great authority and her primary responsibility was discipline and “to meyntene Religion” (seeing that the daily devotions were properly kept).⁴⁴ Also, more generally, she oversaw the obedientiaries who performed functions such as laundry, procurement of supplies, cooking, care of vestments, and nursing of the sick, as well as administering the abbey’s Office of Pensions which distributed funds to the nuns and priests.⁴⁵ Though each obedientiary was essentially in charge of her own department and revenues, she still answered to the prioress. Barking Abbey was large enough to have the additional offices of subprioress and third prioress. Thanks to the skills of these three women, the nuns’ daily routine of praying and working maintained a disciplined balance.

Before we turn to the work performed by the various obedientiaries, we must remember the nuns’ primary occupation was the *opus dei*, or God’s work (which itself suggests the connection between the sacred and labor). Their surviving *Ordinale* suggests they lived a very active liturgical life and were devoted to praying for the souls of their founders and benefactors, including their most important patron, the king. The cycle of religious ritual that made up the nuns’ lives, as prescribed by Saint Benedict, was a daily rhythm of reading, work, and prayer, which both serves the soul and pleases God. One aspect was the daily praying of the Offices: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline. Barking’s *Ordinale* does not reference clock-time so it is difficult to determine the specific time each day when an Office was prayed and for how long.⁴⁶ Chapter eight of the *Rule* states that “mynchyns muste aryse at the viii houre after it be nyght / that is to saye / after the sonue be sette.”⁴⁷ Adjustments were made for the changing length of the day from summer to winter, but in Archbishop John

44 *Essex Monasteries* (ERO, 1964), 17; Sturman, 270.

45 Sturman, 300-4.

46 *The Ordinale and Customary of the Benedictine Nuns of Barking Abbey*, ed. J. B. L. Tolhurst (London: Harris and Sons, Ltd., 1928), 111.

47 See Fox’s translation of the Benedictine Rule printed in Collett, 111.

Peckham's thirteenth-century visitation of the abbey, he specifically states midnight is preferred for Matins because it is "most acceptable to God and the angels."⁴⁸ The nuns generally arose somewhere between midnight and 2:00 a.m. for Matins, and the remaining Offices were prayed at varying intervals throughout the day with the final prayer said around 7:00 or 8:00 p.m.⁴⁹ Mass was also said for them three times per day.⁵⁰

Crucial to the nuns' religious life were the priests whose sole task it was to attend to the women's spiritual needs. Their duties were to celebrate the sacraments, which nuns were not allowed to perform. In the early-sixteenth century Barking had nine priests, and this high number betrays the abbey's overall wealth, for priests were paid employees and dependent on the abbey for their keep.⁵¹ Interestingly, the priests at Barking were not involved in the daily administration of the nunnery as they might have been in a smaller house. Those duties fell solely to the abbess, prioress, and their staff who governed both the priests and themselves for the benefit of their spiritual life.⁵²

Below the abbess and prioress were the obedientiaries charged with completing the various tasks necessary to run the house. On some days, primarily great feast days, there was little time for the nuns to see to the daily chores because they were involved in praying the Offices, mass, chant, and procession, taking only one

48 *The injunctions of Archbishop John Peckham for the abbey of Barking, 1279*, in *Manchester Medieval Sources series: Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066-1500*, tr. and ed., Jennifer Ward (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995), 210.

49 *The Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, ed. William M. Johnston, 2 vols. (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000) suggests a sample winter schedule as Matins 2:30 a.m., Lauds 5 a.m., Prime 6 a.m., Tierce 9 a.m., Sext noon, Nones 3 p.m., Vespers 4:30 p.m., and Compline 6 p.m. (p. 1433); However, Power points out that after Saint Benedict's time Nones was said at noon, leaving the afternoon between Nones and Vespers for work (p. 286).

50 Roseanne Michalek Desilets, "The Nuns of Tudor England: Feminine Responses to the Dissolution of the Monasteries," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Irvine, 1995), 67; Loftus and Chettle, 56.

51 SC 6 Hen. VIII/928; Loftus and Chettle, 56; Sturman, 326.

52 Sturman, 332-3.

break for a meal.⁵³ To get all the necessary work completed the women were divided into “ladies of the household” and “ladies of the choir.” As the titles imply, the household ladies saw to the daily tasks of household upkeep while the choir ladies were singing dirges for patrons.⁵⁴ Of course, the household ladies were not exempt from their normal spiritual duties such as mass and praying the Offices, and there should be no doubt the primary daily focus of each of the nuns’ lives was liturgical.

The nun who held the office of sacrist was vital to this liturgical life, for she was endowed with the very important task of keeping up the abbey’s sacred spaces and objects. Because daily devotion was the most important aspect of life in the nunnery, the sacrist had to be a well-organized, responsible person. She saw to the care of vestments, provision and care of candles, bells, and all of the ornament used during the abbey’s various services.⁵⁵ She also undoubtedly had great knowledge of liturgical practices, which was important for remembering special needs such as when to prepare the tent for processions, candles for Candlemas Day, ashes for Ash Wednesday, and seeing that the proper ornament was hung for feast days.⁵⁶ Moreover, as in all “departments” in the abbey she was also the manager of her own funds.

At Barking, the sacrist was aided by the precentrix and her assistant the succentrix who made sure the ceremonies and chants were carried out correctly in the monastic choir.⁵⁷ But even with this additional help, the sacrist was kept so busy that she was the only nun below the abbess exempted from certain religious duties.⁵⁸

After the sacrist, the most important of the obedientiaries was the cellaress. The cellaress was considered by Benedictine monastic communities to be so important that Saint Benedict, in

53 Sturman, 349.

54 Sturman, 352.

55 *Essex Monasteries* (ERO, 1964), 21; Power, 132.

56 Sturman, 276.

57 Sturman, 277.

58 Sturman, 276, 353 n2.

his *Rule*, specifically addressed only one other office – that of the abbess.⁵⁹ The *Rule* directs that the cellaress should be chosen from the convent and be wise, in good manners, sober, not proud, not troublesome, not slow, and not prodigal. Benedict understood the gravity of the job and the need for a prudent, conservative manager in this position, for he implores that “she shall suffer nothyng / though it be of lyttell value / to goo to waste / nor vnloked to nornecllygently [negligently] left or loste.” To complete all the cellaress is charged with, he further allows that if the convent is large she be able to hire help.⁶⁰ At Barking we find the cellaress was assisted by an under-cellaress, and between them they were responsible for provisioning the abbey with all the food, drink, clothing, and supplies needed by those living in the abbey and visitors alike, as well as payment of servants’ wages.⁶¹

Though many of Barking Abbey’s records do not survive, we are fortunate to have a few extraordinary documents from the late Medieval and Early Modern periods, including one from the cellaress entitled the *Charthe longynge to the office of the Celeresse of the Monasterye of Barking*.⁶² This *Charthe* is undated, though several historians suggest the early fifteenth century.⁶³ The *Charthe* is the same in both language and layout as Barking’s cellaress accounts dating from the 1520s and 1530s, suggesting, at least for the last century and a half of the abbey’s existence, the record keeping was consistent.⁶⁴

These are not governing documents *per se* (though the first paragraph is a reminder to check for arrearages). These were account books; several types recorded items such as receipts and payments,

59 Fox’s English translation of the Benedictine Rule printed in Collett, 126-7.

60 Fox’s English translation of the Benedictine Rule printed in Collett, 126-7.

61 Power, 133.

62 *The Charthe longynge to the Office of Celeresse of the Monasterye of Barking*, in *Monasticon Anglicanum*, trans. Sir William Dugdale, vol. 1 (London, 1693), 80-83.

63 Eckenstein, 372; Loftus and Chettle, 59.

64 SC 6 Hen. VIII/927 and SC 6 Hen. VIII/929.

as well as repairs and expenses that were all part of monastic tradition, and can be seen at similar institutions in this period. For instance, there are multiple cellaress accounts alone spanning many years which survive for Syon monastery in Middlesex.⁶⁵

There is no indication in Barking's cellaress *Charthes* as to when the first account was created or why. Power suggests a "nameless cellaress drew it up for the guidance of her successors," but provides no evidence for that assertion.⁶⁶ It is certainly reasonable from a purely practical and economic (not to mention legal) sense that an institution as large and wealthy as Barking would have been doomed without someone doing the paperwork. Nonetheless, what these documents provide is an amazing sense of not only the scope of responsibility placed on the shoulders of the cellaress and her staff, but also of the day-in and day-out requirements for provisioning a monastery of Barking's size during this later period.

According to the *Charthes* the cellaress monitored and collected rents from various farmers and tenants.⁶⁷ She then used that income to manage the farm and purchase additional foodstuffs and supplies as necessary.⁶⁸ By the later Middle Ages, she had hefty annual revenues of approximately £98 at her disposal (equivalent to over £30,000 in 2011).⁶⁹ Her income was also used to hire assistants; in addition to the under-cellaress, Barking's cellaress employed three cooks, a rent collector, and a clerk who helped her keep her accounts.⁷⁰ The *Charthes* also provide detailed instructions

65 An internet search on the National Archives' website for "cellaress" in the period 1350 to 1550 will bring up multiple accounts. See www.nationalarchives.gov.uk.

66 Power, 563.

67 The *Charthe* printed in Dugdale, 80.

68 Sturman, 293-4. See also the *Charthe* printed in Dugdale, under the heading "Pittance of the Covent," 81.

69 Sturman, 291; "Currency Converter," The National Archives, accessed 17 April 2011, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency>. In 1540 an annual income of £98 could buy 20 horses or 78 cows, 105 quarters of wheat or 4,284 U.S. pounds of wool, or pay the daily wages for nine men to work a full year (365 days).

70 *Essex Monasteries* (ERO, 1964), 22; SC 6 Hen. VIII/929; Sturman, 297.

on everything from the “offerings ” she is to pay, the anniversaries and pittances to be observed, the amounts and types of food to be provided (and when), to the “Hyreing of Pastur” and “Mowyng and making of heye.”⁷¹ Though their *Rule* did not support it, travel outside the convent walls to purchase supplies for filling in gaps would have been occasionally necessary for the cellaress and her assistants. Papal bulls such as *Periculoso* issued in 1298 required strict, active enclosure of Catholic nuns, but by the late-fourteenth or early-fifteenth centuries times had changed drastically. Nuns no longer possessed the luxury of complete withdrawal from the world. New economic, political, and social realities meant that nuns had to engage with the secular world to survive.⁷² For the cellaress and her staff, occasional travel outside convent walls was part of the delicate balancing act required in order to live a life of worship.

While the cellaress was the ultimate purchasing agent, it fell to the kitcheness to prepare the food, and to the fratress to see to the maintenance of the refectory. Barking had two fratresses who kept the dining hall, including tables and chairs, clean and in good repair.⁷³ They also saw to the purchase and maintenance of dish and tableware.⁷⁴ The office of kitcheness seems to have been a permanent post at Barking according to the *Charthes*, which may have been exceptional since their *Rule* required the nuns to take weekly turns at service in the kitchen.⁷⁵ The women were able to afford a relatively varied and interesting diet. The nuns ate fresh beef three times per week (Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday) except during Advent and Lent.⁷⁶ This is a noteworthy comment on the status of the abbey,

71 The *Charthe* printed in Dugdale, 82.

72 Spear, xvi.

73 *Essex Monasteries* (ERO, 1964), 12.

74 Power, 132.

75 Eckenstein, 375-6. See also Fox’s translation of the Benedictine Rule printed in Collet, “The xxxv chapitre treateth of the weekly kychynners,” 129-30.

76 Power, 564; The *Charthe* printed in Dugdale, 82.

because fresh meat was expensive to procure so it was only eaten by household members with the highest rank, even in secular society.⁷⁷ The nuns ate pork, and to a lesser degree mutton, and a large quantity of fish and eels during Lent. There was also oatmeal, dried beans, butter, milk, eggs, crisps (fritters), crumbcakes, chickens, geese, spiced pies, and red wine – all consumed through the year on various feast days. Because of the overall blandness of the Lenten diet, for variety and spice the kitcheness added rice, almonds, figs, raisins, and mustard to her preparations.

The English monasteries had differing numbers of offices depending on the house's size and wealth. Most had the basic positions already discussed. Barking's *Ordinale* lists the additional offices found there as: librarian, circuitrices, searchers, mistress of novices, and almoness.⁷⁸ The librarian cared for the monastery's books, which at the abbey's dissolution in 1539 totaled more than twenty texts and various manuscripts, and which were circulated annually for the nuns' education and enjoyment.⁷⁹ The circuitrice was responsible for "circulating" and ensuring that the nuns who were supposed to be engaged in their daily reading were doing so. This office may also have been related to the "reader" or legister, who was responsible for the weekly reading during meals as required by Benedict's *Rule*.⁸⁰ The searchers, sometimes called scrutatrices, had the duty of policing the house and reporting disorder to the prioress.⁸¹ The mistress of novices was in charge of the novices (referred to as *colares* at Barking), acting as their teacher and general guide, preparing them for the monastic life they would lead after they had professed their vows.⁸² The almoness attended to the abbey's

77 C. M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 113.

78 *Ordinale*, 68; Sturman, 269.

79 Sturman, 269.

80 Eckenstein, 391; See also Fox's translation of the Benedictine Rule in Collet, 132-3.

81 Eckenstein, 216.

82 Power, 134; Sturman, 271-2.

almsgiving, which as mentioned above was also required by the *Rule*.⁸³ The offices of chambress and infirmaress are not specifically mentioned in the *Ordinale*, though a visitation report does mention Barking's infirmary; therefore, we may assume an infirmaress was appointed to oversee that area.⁸⁴ The office of chambress also probably existed since a large abbey like Barking certainly required attendance to care of clothing and bedding.⁸⁵ Other monasteries had these officers, but the important thing to consider about the absence or presence of specific offices is the overall flexibility of a system that allowed the nuns to make decisions themselves about how best to manage their communities.

At Barking a nun had to be professed a minimum of seven years before the abbess could appoint her to an office, which is an important indicator of how seriously they took their responsibilities since they restricted office holders to those they felt were mature and capable enough to handle the task.⁸⁶ The appointments were made each year on the first Monday of Lent. The obedientiaries stood down from their offices on Sunday, and the abbess evaluated their performance over the previous year. Those who had performed well were praised, rewarded, and reappointed; those who had not were replaced.⁸⁷ Now of course the nuns were human beings and challenges did arise. Not every nun was equally capable or qualified, but it is clear this annual system of review enabled the sisters to maintain a level of competence among those who held important positions. In fact, many of them exhibited their skills by holding their positions for several years, or better yet, by being promoted to higher offices. For example, Thomasina Jenney, who was sacrist before 1508, was promoted to prioress and held that

83 Power, 132; Sturman, 299.

84 *The injunctions of Archbishop John Peckham for the abbey of Barking*, 212.

85 Loftus and Chettle, 55.

86 Loftus and Chettle, 55; Oliva, *The Convent and the Community*, 85.

87 Loftus and Chettle, 55; Sturman, 268-9.

office until the dissolution in 1539.⁸⁸ Margaret Scrope served first as precentrix in 1527, then “lady of the pension” in 1535-6, and finally was subprioress at the dissolution three years later.⁸⁹ Competence can also be seen in the length of service of Barking’s later abbesses; in its last 150 years the majority of them held the office for thirteen years or more.⁹⁰ Katherine de la Pole served an amazing forty years in the fifteenth century.⁹¹

Careful management by competent women was vital. It was not in their best interests to create additional problems for themselves by mismanaging resources; it would be foolish to suggest they were not fully aware of this. It is essential to keep in mind, as no doubt did the nuns, the practical reasons for sensible and effective management; without it the house would fall into ruin, and the nuns’ life of dedication to their faith would disintegrate.

The *Rule of Saint Benedict* required nuns and monks to provide for themselves through their own labor, but for a large house such as Barking the ability to hire lay help (which is recorded in the surviving documents) was of vital importance.⁹² There were several types of arrangements that existed at any given time: seasonal laborers who worked only for food and drink; contracted workers who made most of their money as self-employed businessmen, providing a good or service to the monastery;⁹³ household or farm workers who received eighty percent of their income in kind plus small cash

88 Loftus and Chettle, 52; Sturman, 300, 439.

89 A.I. Doyle, “Books Connected with the Vere Family and Barking Abbey,” in *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, 25 (1958), 234; Loftus and Chettle, 52; Sturman, 439.

90 Five out of seven abbesses, or 71%.

91 Loftus and Chettle, 42, 48.

92 J.E. Oxley, *The Reformation in Essex to the Death of Mary* (Manchester: The University Press, 1983), 282; Power, 150.

93 Barbara Harvey, *Living and Dying in England 1100-1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 176.

stipends; and finally, people like the priests who completely relied on the abbey for everything including bed, board, and wages. The constant creation and maintenance of relationships with workers in the lay community were undoubtedly some of the most important functions in the abbey. To keep track of what must have been a very fluid atmosphere inside the nunnery, particularly from season to season, doubtless took diligence and competence. Many of the smaller, impoverished nunneries could not afford to hire help, and several complaints are recorded by nuns stating that their daily chores were taking too much of their time and energy.⁹⁴ But Barking Abbey was fortunate because its financial status enabled its nuns to hire the help that was essential for allowing them to concentrate on their primary purpose – their spiritual obligations.⁹⁵

CONCLUSION

*E*nglish nunneries like Barking Abbey were clearly places buzzing with activity, and for their officer-nuns this meant high levels of responsibility and authority. It took considerable effort to see that life inside an enclosed environment was carried out as smoothly as possible for everyone. Though not all the nuns there aspired to hold office, nor were they all equally capable of doing so, those who did seem to have performed (for the most part) quite admirably. The proof is in the financial and spiritual health of the house when the doors were forever closed in 1539.

Curiously, historians of women and work in the late Medieval and Early Modern periods have tended to ignore or treat lightly the important jobs that nuns did to manage their communities, focusing almost entirely on women's work in secular society. We have seen that many secular women did have opportunities to work, but mostly in jobs that were low-wage, menial, and not desired by men. But to make a fair comparison for the women of Barking Abbey we need to look specifically at the work performed by higher status secular women because the nuns there consistently came from the upper gentry, aristocracy, and even at times royal, families.

⁹⁴ Power, 153.

⁹⁵ Loftus and Chettle, 56.

C.M. Woolgar has shown that many a great lady held at least some responsibility for overseeing the servants, and therefore aspects of the daily management of her own estate, but notes that the shift toward more females managing the house was only beginning in the sixteenth century.⁹⁶ Certainly some elite women often assisted in keeping accounts or watching over the domestic help, which Rowena Archer has argued was the case particularly where husbands were frequently absent on business or had died. In those cases women had little choice but to help manage affairs to protect property and inheritances. They were involved, but primarily only when circumstances dictated it.⁹⁷ When we view that against just the tasks consistently performed in the nunnery such as managing estates and natural resources, recordkeeping, hiring and supervising employees, provision of material resources, and even opportunities for promotion, the jobs of secular elite women cannot compare.

Despite this, even among historians of women's monasticism there are differences in opinion about the levels of responsibility and authority found in the nunnery.⁹⁸ Some suggest opportunities may not have been as plentiful as previously suggested because, in the end, women's lives were still controlled by male interests, in the case of nuns, the male-dominated Catholic Church.⁹⁹ Other historians stretching all the way back to include Eileen Power and Lina Eckenstein have found it important that nuns were occupying

96 Woolgar, 202-03.

97 Rowena E. Archer, "How ladies . . . who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates: Women as Landholders and Administrators in the Later Middle Ages," in *Woman Is A Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c. 1200-1500*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg (Wolfeboro Falls, NH: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1992), 149-181.

98 See for instance, *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe* (1986), edited by Barbara Hanawalt, which focuses so completely on secular women that the words "nun," "monastery," or "religious" are not to be found in its contents nor its index. As well, *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages* (1989), edited by Judith Bennett, et al, has only one section concerning women's monasticism, and it focuses on expansion and decline in the period 500 to 1100, failing to address office-holding patterns or administrative opportunities for religious women. David Herlihy actually includes a section titled "Convent" in his *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (1990), but he only briefly covers convents in Normandy, followed by a discussion of the Beguines. The thrust of his coverage of convent work hinges on the profit motive and restrictions on religious women's ability to make enough money to survive. As with Bennett, there is essentially no mention of the many and varied administrative responsibilities that nuns assumed in order to manage their communities.

99 Maryanne Kowaleski and Judith M. Bennett, 25.

responsible positions of authority not experienced by most secular women, seeing nunneries as havens of independence. There is probably some truth in both arguments.

While nuns were ultimately answerable to the Church, which meant answerable to men, the reality is that complete freedom from male influence was a rarity for any woman of that time. The fact remains that nuns (especially abbesses) were remarkably adept at managing themselves, often in extremely challenging circumstances, and without requiring a husband to validate them financially or legally.¹⁰⁰ Evidence such as Barking Abbey's cellaress *Charthes* and Office of Pensions Account, as well as bishop's registers, account rolls, and petitions from nunneries large and small, shows that their obligations were extensive and indeed carried out daily by the sisters themselves and those they employed and supervised.

More research needs to be done in this area to place nuns' contributions into the debate on women's work because, on balance, opportunities for education and outlets for administrative skill existed inside the convent to a greater extent than anywhere else. As Penelope Johnson so succinctly put it, "In no institution other than monasticism could women participate so fully in shaping their own lives."¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, though it has been shown here that opportunities for work and advancement certainly existed in convents, this paper asserts that most nuns did not enter monastic life for the opportunity to develop an administrative career, but rather simply to serve God. All of the opportunities and responsibilities could have fostered a positive self-image, but the nun's primary identity remained locked in her role as a bride of Christ.

100 Spear, 191.

101 Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 206.

Late-medieval and early-modern nuns could not have perceived their jobs in the same way that professional women do in the twenty-first century. While they may have viewed their offices as important and deserving of respect, everything they did was primarily to ensure their institution's survival and to bring them closer to God. Nothing mattered more. Barking's abbess had to oversee effectively the house and its estates, including maintenance of relationships with patrons and tenants, so that revenues would continue to be raised. Likewise, the cellaress and kitcheness had to make sure the nuns were physically fed so that they could go about their business of spiritually nourishing themselves and others. The infirmaress had to tend to the nuns' illnesses, keeping them healthy so their prayers for the community would continue. And lastly, the mistress of novices had to see to the spiritual and intellectual education of her charges so that new nuns would be professed, ensuring the community continued after elderly sisters passed away. In the end, they had to sustain themselves in order to serve God, thus all the hard work was simply an extension of their faith just as it had always been for countless monks and nuns whose lives were dictated by centuries of Christian and monastic tradition.

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