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“Temples to Christ’s Indwelling”: Forms of Chastity in a Barking Abbey Manuscript

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BRITISH LIBRARY, MANUSCRIPT ADDITIONAL 10596 (hereafter MS Add. 10596), a fifteenth-century collection of Middle English religious texts, belonged at first in succession to two nuns of Barking Abbey in Essex, England. This article interprets the self-contained latter half of this manuscript, perhaps copied by one of these nuns, Matilda Hayle, as an anthology of writings on Christian chastity that derived particular meanings from the social milieu of Barking. The book gathers a unique group of narratives and prayers that together emphasize the overlapping and mutually influential sexualities of virgins, chaste widows, and continent wives in a religious setting where these groups mingled with unusual freedom. When one reads this book’s contents in terms of contemporary discourses of chastity and the particular practices of Barking, it becomes clear how the anthology made monastic chastity inseparable from the states of wifhood and widowhood.

In the later Middle Ages women of varying social and sexual statuses played important roles in the administration and support of Barking, a Benedictine abbey founded in the seventh century. A royal house dedicated to the queenly Saint Ethelburga, Barking enjoyed a history of aristocratic abbesses, including three queens and two princesses, and it drew members and bequests from the higher echelons of English society, though by the end of the Middle Ages new recruits came primarily from the gentry class, that is, from wealthy commoners.¹ Among its many late

I am grateful to Jennifer N. Brown for encouraging me to contribute to this special issue and to Sally N. Vaughn, Christina Christoforou, and Mathew Kuefler for their thoughtful editing. I would like to thank Mary C. Erler for the scholarship that inspired my work on British Library, Manuscript Additional 10596 and for her help with research questions related to this article.

¹ See Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 42 (on Barking’s illustrious abbesses), 13 (on the frequency of bequests to Barking by well-to-do citizens of the nearby City of London). On the “social level” of nuns in the fifteenth century see Mary C. Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety in Late Medieval*

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medieval female benefactors, perhaps the most famous was Elisabeth de Vere, Countess of Oxford, a widow who had vowed herself to chastity in an episcopal ceremony after her husband's death. The redoubtable abbess Sibyl de Felton, who served from 1393 until her death in 1419, was still married to Thomas de Morley when she took monastic vows.² Not only was Barking receptive to admitting this particular type of chaste wife to membership in its community, but the abbey's fifteenth-century ordinal (compiled during Sibyl's tenure) gave widows the unusual privilege of wearing white clothes to take their vows, visibly conferring the purity of honorary virginity upon them as they entered religious life. I suggest that Barking's institutional willingness to admit a range of women as nuns and to "elide social categories," in Mary Erler's terms, was reinforced and extended in the literary realm by the unique combination of devotional texts found in MS Add. 10596.³

This manuscript is today a composite book whose first part, containing the popular instructional text *The Book of the Craft of Dying*, originally circulated separately. The second part of the volume, copied by a single scribe and signed by two nuns, is my principal concern. This section collects the biblical book of Tobit; popular medieval prayers, including the Magnificat and Benedictus; a series of petitions to saints, including virgins and maidens; and the story of Susannah from the book of Daniel. In this manuscript, likely compiled and used at Barking, prayers and narratives worked in tandem to highlight the potential for shared exemplarity among continent wives, chaste widows, and virgins.

This book's contents advertised the possibility for women of various sexualities who lived in community to benefit spiritually from each other's chastity, to "elide" boundaries that are not only social but sexual: boundaries between multiple forms of chastity in a shared religious setting. Whereas in one of the collection's prayers to "holy virgins" these virgins absorbed and exemplified the virtues of sexually faithful wives and chaste widows, the narratives of Tobit and Susannah offered continent wives as potential models for virginal and widowed nuns. The book of

England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18. For the class origins of nuns in various houses in the diocese of Norwich (in which Barking Abbey lay) see Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell, 1998), 54, 105–10.

² While Sibyl became abbess in 1393, Thomas did not die until 1413: she sought a "spiritually focussed life which superseded [her] marital ties and which was supplemented by a substantial personal library" (Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety*, 53). For a comprehensive study of the medieval practice of sexual abstinence within marriage see Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³ Mary C. Erler, "Margery Kempe's White Clothes," *Medium Ævum* 62, no. 1 (1993): 83 n. 9.

Tobit was often recommended in the later medieval period as a story teaching masculine virtue and piety, but it took on new meaning in this nun's collection when it appeared following the story of Susannah. These two dramatic narratives told of faithful wives who narrowly evaded rape and slander by virtue of patience, bodily purity, and stubborn resistance to evil speech. Tobit's wife, Sara, and Susannah both offered models of enclosure and forbearance that suggested the productivity of married continence for the virginal, vowed, and widowed nuns of Barking. Analyzing this manuscript's various textual strategies for shaping a range of female readers into "temples to Christ's indwelling" enables new insights into monastic sexuality in relation to bookish culture and the rhythms of life in the late medieval English cloister.

As Pierre Payer has shown in his study of sexual norms and regulations in later medieval Europe, virginity, widowed continence, and married chastity comprised "the three parts of temperance that were traditionally associated with the moderation of sexual behavior."⁴ According to Saint Jerome's interpretation of Christ's parable of the sower, particularly influential from the twelfth century onward, the virginal, the widowed, and the married would receive hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold rewards, respectively, at the Last Judgment.⁵ While virginity stood as the pinnacle of chastity, representing the "most complete subjection of the flesh," Jerome's hierarchy also provided the basis in scholastic and pastoral writing of the Middle Ages for what Payer calls "a rich tradition that saw in chastity an excellence to be encouraged, promoted, and safeguarded in accordance with the chosen life-style of Christians, whatever it might be."⁶

Alongside the continued elevation of virginity in literature intended for religious women, records of social practice show that marriage and widowhood might also be avenues to chastity, if this multifaceted Latin and Middle English term is taken in its fullest late medieval sense. For by the thirteenth century, "chastity won the day as the virtue concerned with sexual feelings and desires" and became the overarching term referring to forms of sexual purity in all three of these states of life.⁷ The Latin word *castitas* tended to be used broadly to denote lack of sexual experience, commitment to celibate religious life, sexual faithfulness, or abstinence in marriage.⁸ Likewise, the Middle English equivalent, *chastite*, gathered the virginal, the celibate, and the faithfully married within one capacious

⁴ Pierre Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 133.

⁵ For example, Jerome, *Against Jovinian*, 1.3, quoted in and translated by Payer, *The Bridling of Desire*, 176.

⁶ Payer, *The Bridling of Desire*, 177, 160.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 154–55.

⁸ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

term meaning, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, “the virtue of sexual purity as defined by Christian doctrine, i.e., virginity, abstinence of men and women in orders, faithfulness (or abstinence) between man and wife, abstinence of widows, continence or abstinence of men.”⁹ The Wycliffite work *The Lantern of Light*, written in about 1425, offered a visual metaphor to suggest the binding of all three states in the shared work of chastity: “A belt [*girdil*] of chastity . . . girds up their loins. . . . In maidens it preserves [*kepþ*] virginity, in the married, true matrimony, and in widows, continence.”¹⁰ Emblematized as a restraining *girdil*, chastity demanded the variety of sexual self-control appropriate to one’s status.

Although the virginity-oriented treatise *Holy Maidenhood*, written in the early thirteenth century also in England, had posited married, widowed, and virginal states as strictly separate, picturing maidenhood as “the treasure that once lost can never be found,” the expansive definition of chastity cited above that had come into existence by the end of the Middle Ages offered a model more reflective of real life in the later medieval English nunnery.¹¹ This definition was particularly relevant for Barking, a monastic setting that embraced virgins, widows, and wives as nuns, and for the spiritual anthology in MS Add. 10596, which stressed the mutual exemplarity of virgins and widows and foregrounded even sexually faithful wives as potential models for monastic women. For nuns, as historians of medieval sexuality have shown, virginal and married sexualities were always mutually constitutive. Sara Salih argues that nuns’ identity as “brides of Christ [*sponsae Christi*]” linked their sexuality to the secular married state, while conversely, all women led the lives of virgins when professed in the monastic order, regardless of prior sexual experience. The nun’s identity as *sponsa Christi*, Salih contends, “locks into, constitutes and confirms the virgin body but does so in contexts which stress the continuity between secular and sacred female identities.”¹² She adds that while monks tended to invoke a bridal identity to emphasize their imitation of Christ himself, in contrast, “nuns’ brideship is continuous with the silent, obedient, private wifehood of secular women.”¹³ Entry into the monastic life, and

⁹ *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Frances McSparran, available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v. “chastite.” See also *ibid.*, s.v. “chaste”: “Sexually pure (as defined by Christian doctrine): (a) virginal, abstinent, continent, chaste; (b) as noun: a virgin (man or woman); (c) true or faithful (to one’s mate).”

¹⁰ *The Lanterne of List, edited from MS Harley 234*, ed. Lilian M. Swinburn (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1915), 65, lines 19–23, my translation.

¹¹ *Holy Maidenhood*, translated in *Anchoritic Spirituality: “Ancrene Wisse” and Associated Works*, ed. Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 223–43, at 228.

¹² Sara Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 119. Also see Michel Foucault’s comments on the productive relation between virginity and married identity: “In the mystique of virginity which developed after the thirteenth century the rigour of this [sexual] renunciation . . . transforms the negative aspect of

especially the novice's profession of marriage to Christ, which structurally mirrored the secular marriage service, inducted all nuns into a shared form of spiritual virginity, a purity equally valid for those who had been married as for those who were still physically virgins. Salih notes: "All veiled nuns, whatever their previous experiences of temptation or marriage, are consecrated virgins by virtue of their professions."¹⁴ Thus, although in a nun's life virginal identity superseded secular married identity, a nun's virginity and a married woman's continence existed on a continuum.¹⁵

Where did widows find themselves on this continuum of chastity, and how did the continence of widows relate in practice to the monastic profession? In later medieval England, in keeping with *Holy Maidenhood's* earlier rhetoric exhorting widows to "praise their Lord, and thank him sincerely that his power held them in chaste purity after they had tried the filth of the flesh," widows were widely exhorted to practice rigorous abstinence in terms of bodily consumption and sexual practices.¹⁶ Some widows made vows of permanent chastity, donning a mantle and ring in a public episcopal ceremony to assume the new social role of "vowess."¹⁷ With their public promises of celibacy signaled by the clothing, ring, and ritual that recalled the nun's profession, vowesses took a visible step in the direction of monastic life, although they tended to stay in their own homes, living independently of religious communities or specific textual regulations.¹⁸ For widows with sufficient means to remain financially independent without

continence into the promise of spiritual marriage" ("The Battle for Chastity," in *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, ed. Philippe Ariès and André Béjin, trans. Anthony Forster [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985], 24).

¹⁴ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 130.

¹⁵ See Virginia Blanton, "Chaste Marriage, Sexual Desire, and Christian Martyrdom in *La vie sainte Andree*," in this issue for an example of a continent wife regarded as a saint in the twelfth century.

¹⁶ *Holy Maidenhood*, trans. Savage and Watson, 232–33. See also Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety*, 20. One surviving Middle English guide for widows (Oxford University, Bodleian Library, Manuscript Bodley 938, fol. 266) exhorted widows to live "in holy and devout prayers and in abstinence, not only abstaining from all tempting and excessive food and drink, but also from worldly wealth and sexual encounters" (Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety*, 20, my translation).

¹⁷ For discussions of the vowess life, with much contemporary documentation on individual vowesses, see Mary C. Erler, "Three Fifteenth-Century Vowesses," in *Medieval London Widows*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton (London: Hambledon, 1994), 165–83; Mary C. Erler, "English Vowed Women at the End of the Middle Ages," *Mediaeval Studies* 57 (1995): 155–203; and Mary C. Erler, "Widows in Retirement: Region, Patronage, Spirituality, Reading at the Gaunts, Bristol," *Religion & Literature* 37, no. 2 (2005): 51–75.

¹⁸ Less frequently, unmarried women or wives might assume this role. Margery Kempe, the outspoken East Anglian pilgrim and visionary of the fifteenth century well known to medieval scholars, is the most famous contemporary example of a wife desiring to take vows as well as wear the white clothes typically associated with virginity. As Erler ("Margery Kempe's White Clothes," 81) notes, it is unlikely that Kempe ever received the white mantle and ring publicly.

remarrying, chastity might function as a point of entry into a dedicated religious life relatively free of male supervision. Considering the states of virginity, widowhood, and marriage as distinctive forms of chastity reveals their dependence on each other and upon a common ceremonial vocabulary that defined “chastity” as a sometimes paradoxical combination of spousal obedience and independent self-discipline.

This combination is evident at the nunnery of Barking, where in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries women of varying sexual statuses gathered under one roof. In order to contextualize the anthology of chastities found in the Barking manuscript, it is important to show how the ceremony of profession recorded for late medieval Barking constructed monastic chastity as a dynamic commitment shared among a range of women rather than a defensive or static posture restricted solely to anatomical virgins. This attitude was in contrast to the late medieval church’s official view of female monastic chastity as a fragile quality that could only be ensured by the strict enclosure of nuns and the exclusion of secular people from the cloister. The papal bull *Periculoso*, promulgated in 1298, made nuns across Christendom subject to a renewed mandate to enclosure that enforced their roles as contemplative brides of Christ. *Periculoso*, ostensibly written in response to scandals caused by nuns traveling outside their abbeys and admitting inappropriate guests, required nuns to remain perpetually enclosed and restricted outsiders from entering abbeys. With these restrictions in place, Pope Boniface declared in the bull that nuns may “be able to serve God more freely, wholly separated from the public and worldly gaze and, occasions for lasciviousness having been removed, may most diligently safeguard their hearts and bodies in complete chastity.”¹⁹ This view of chastity as inward looking, defensive, and radically separate from worldly sexuality is predicated on the danger of the male gaze to nuns’ celibacy and also on the possibility that secular women, potentially among those “suspect persons” who might breach convent walls and cause “shame and scandal,” could tempt nuns to betray their commitment to abstinence.²⁰

At Barking, however, as at all women’s religious houses of the period, and despite such prohibitions, a range of secular women participated in the life of the house. Two who left traces in wills include the aristocratic vowess and benefactor Elizabeth de Vere, who died in 1537 after making a special bequest to the abbey in her will;²¹ and Beatrice Tynggelden, who lived at the abbey in a “quasi-religious state” while her sister, Elizabeth Grene, was abbess there. As Erler shows, Beatrice invoked the overlapping

¹⁹ *Periculoso*, trans. Elizabeth Makowski, in *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: “Periculoso” and Its Commentators 1298–1545* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1997), 135. The Latin text may be found in *Corporis iuris canonici*, ed. Aemilius Friedberg, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1881), 2:1054.

²⁰ See *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. Friedberg, 2:1053.

²¹ A. I. Doyle, “Books Connected with the Vere Family and Barking Abbey,” *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society* 25, pt. 1 (1955): 222–43, at 236.

bonds of familial and communal sisterhood, asking in her 1520 will to be buried in the abbey “wherever it shall please my lady the Abbess to assign it, to whom I submit myself unto her obedience, as one of her sisters.”²²

For those who moved beyond quasi-religious roles such as vowess to embrace full monastic life, Barking gathered women of varied sexual experience into its vision of monastic chastity, as is evident from its unusual profession ceremony. The text was preserved in the abbey’s *Ordinale*, a guide to liturgical custom compiled in 1404 and presented to Sibyl de Felton, the abbess who, as mentioned above, entered the monastery while still married after having made a vow of marital chastity. The *Ordinale*, copied in Latin and French, gives an exceptionally full record of customs during the fifteenth century, the period when MS Add. 10596 was also copied and used. The *Ordinale* included in its “ceremony for consecrating a virgin” the ritual for virgins and widows wishing to enter the order. This ceremony did not simply erase preexisting distinctions between virgins and sexually experienced postulants but admitted virgins and widows on parallel terms as entrants into the order, inducting these groups into a shared spiritual virginity while acknowledging distinctions between their forms of chastity. Although virgins walked in procession before widows in the ceremony, both were permitted to wear white clothes for their spiritual marriage to Christ.²³ Allowing widows as well as virgins to wear white was an unusual practice, as Erler has noted, in comparison with other English orders such as the Bridgettines or even the Benedictine nuns of the nunnery at Winchester.²⁴ Thus, for the widow, visually as well as spiritually, the ceremony “reproduce[s] . . . monastic virginity,” in Salih’s phrase, as virgin and widow appeared in identical garments of maidenhood.²⁵

While visual and verbal distinctions existed between virgins and widows in the ceremony of profession, these distinctions ultimately suggested their shared participation in a continuum of monastic chastity. When the time came for the bishop to bestow the monastic vestments (called “the garment of virginity”) upon the postulants, he referred to the virgin as *puella* (maiden) and to the widow as *ancilla* (handmaid or servant) in ceremonial formulas that are otherwise identical. The *Ordinale* instructed the celebrant: “Let the maiden/handmaid [*puella/ancilla*] receive the garment that you offer.”²⁶ While the virginity of the *puella* went without saying, *ancilla* was a term expressing subordination and might be seen

²² See Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety*, 20, my translation, although the phrase “quasi-religious state” is Erler’s.

²³ *The Ordinale and Customary of the Benedictine Nuns of Barking Abbey*, ed. J. B. L. Tolhurst, 2 vols. (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1928), 2:353. The virgin and widow were each to be “dressed in white garments with head uncovered.” All translations from the *Ordinale* are mine.

²⁴ See Erler, “Margery Kempe’s White Clothes,” 83 n. 9.

²⁵ Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 129.

²⁶ *Ordinale*, ed. Tolhurst, 2:353.

to have conferred lesser status from the point of view of sexual purity. The most familiar religious association of this term for women, however, was with the Virgin Mary's self-description in the Magnificat, her biblical song of praise. Thus, the use of this term in the ceremony created a strong connection between the widow and the Virgin Mary, who was also, of course, a *puella* (Luke 1:48–49). Here, both virgins and sexually experienced women were assimilated to the same ultimate model, one who embodied chastity in the roles of maiden and wife simultaneously. As they moved together through the ceremony, virgin and widow underwent very similar ritual treatment (as the repeated phrase “virgin or widow [*virgo vel vidua*]” suggested in the instructions), with the exception that only the virgin approached the altar with a lighted candle. However, the ceremony culminated with virgin and widow both receiving rings of marriage to Christ on the same terms and approaching the altar with a candle after mass. This document of practice shows that in the Barking community, where MS Add. 10596 was read and perhaps compiled, the varieties of virginal, married, and widowed chastities were built into monastic identity in the most fundamental way.

Fifteenth-century Barking was a place where worldly and monastic women mingled and where their chastities may have influenced each other in reciprocal ways. In later medieval England more widely the exchange of religious books was a critical means for women, both professed and secular, to share knowledge and modes of practice and to cement friendships, both formal and intimate. A prominent house with connections to royal and gentry families, Barking was located at the center of a far-flung literary network. An earlier Elisabeth de Vere (d. 1476/77), who was a predecessor to the wealthy sixteenth-century vowess mentioned above, gave the abbey some of its most famous books, mostly collections of spiritual texts in French and English.²⁷ MS Add. 10596 may have come to Barking from another religious house, perhaps from the Dominican nuns at Denny, to judge from its first text, the popular *Book of the Craft of Dying*, which featured a small illustration of a male religious, probably a Dominican friar.²⁸ The second half of the manuscript, though, was copied separately, perhaps at Barking, where the two parts were ultimately bound together. This latter half of the book, likely written for and read by the two nuns whose names appear in it, combined texts that reflected explicitly and implicitly on the continuum of chastity that existed among virgins, wives, and widows at Barking. Making virgins exemplary for women in all states and suggesting that wives could be models for virgins and widows, these texts envisioned this continuum in a literary realm that might, in turn, have influenced practice.

²⁷ See Doyle, “Books Connected,” 235–39.

²⁸ This is Doyle's speculation (*ibid.*, 242).

The fact that we can identify the community and that we have the names of two nuns who first owned this book offers a rare opportunity to speculate about the meanings of this collection in a female house with well-documented customs. (Unfortunately, no information survives about the two nuns whose signatures appear in the book, Matilda Hayle and Marie Hastynges.) Barking possessed a large and well-organized library; several monastic officers were dedicated to managing it and distributing books among the nuns. The nuns of Barking were deliberate in caring for their books, and procedures from the *Ordinale* show the seriousness with which the order took each sister's responsibility to educate herself through private reading as well as communal liturgical practice. In keeping with Benedictine monastic tradition, each nun was given a book annually to read from cover to cover and was held to account for this reading at the end of the year. If she had failed to read her assigned book, the sister was required to accuse herself publicly and receive penance from the abbess.²⁹ Books were obviously considered a critical part of every Barking inhabitant's self-education. It is likely from its personal inscriptions that MS Add. 10596 was one such book for individual or even group study. What it taught, though, was not the inward-looking and exclusive approach to chastity promulgated in the papal decree *Periculoso*. Rather, in its prayers and narratives the collection suggested the possibility for many forms of mutual chaste exemplarity among virgins, widows, and wives.

The manuscript featured several prayers that resonated with Barking's inclusive ideology of chastity. Notably, these prayers began with a Middle English version of the Magnificat, the Virgin Mary's song of praise in which she referred to herself as the "handmaiden [*ancilla*]" of God, the same epithet used to describe the widowed postulant in the *Ordinale*'s ceremony of profession. The prayer begins: "My soul magnifies the Lord. And my spirit has rejoiced in God, my help. For he has seen the meekness of his handmaiden."³⁰ The inclusion of the Magnificat established the Virgin Mary as the essential model for all users who might read and speak these texts aloud, imagining or voicing her words to the angel Gabriel. Whether these users were limited to the two nuns who signed the book we cannot know, but it seems likely, given Barking's practices of book distribution, that the manuscript circulated among various members of the house during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and that its users were not limited to lifelong virgins.

I have already suggested that at Barking the identity of "virgin"—as cultural performance rather than innate condition—was available to women of many sexual statuses.³¹ In keeping with that notion, this volume's petitionary prayer

²⁹ *Ordinale*, ed. Tolhurst, 1:68.

³⁰ MS Add. 10596, fols. 47v–48r. I have retained original Middle English spellings but modernized punctuation and expanded abbreviations. All translations are mine.

³¹ This is Salih's distinction, derived from Judith Butler's influential notion of performativity (discussed at length in *Versions of Virginity*, 32–40). Salih argues: "In Butlerian terms,

to virgin saints, entitled “Of Virgins,” envisions these numinous women as witnessing and absorbing many forms of chastity: maidenhood, widowhood, continence, and martyrdom.³² This prayer asks virgin saints to intercede with God to take away the petitioners’ sins, including lust, for, as the text reads, “nor is there power in our frailty to overcome the manifold sinful lusts of man’s flesh, except through the multiplication of your holy prayers.” Earthly petitioners needed the power conferred by the purity of the virgin saints to make up for their own bodily weaknesses. Beyond asking for aid in this typical fashion, which emphasized the gap in spiritual power between holy saints and sinful mortals, the prayer proceeded, more surprisingly, to narrow the apparent gap between these saints and the female sinners beseeching their help. The next passage even suggests that these virgin saints might prove exemplary for women in other sexual states, as it asks:

Just as you despised the world courageously and steadfastly in favor of God, and loved your spouse Christ faithfully and truly, and as for his love and his name you forsook the deceptive lusts of the flesh and the world, and as you sanctified your bodies and your souls *with chastity, with maidenhood, with widowhood, continence, and temperance, and in passion of martyrdom, as temples to Christ’s indwelling, so may you pray devoutly to God on account of the excessiveness of our sins* [*so preie ze bisili at God for alle excessis of our offensis*] with your . . . most kind, merciful, and compassionate motherly prayers.³³

Positing virgins as participants not only in the radical purity of “maidenhood” but as “sanctifying [their] bodies and souls” with all the possible forms of chastity that earthly women might embody, including those of the abstinent widow and continent wife, this prayer invited Barking readers of varied sexual statuses to participate in and benefit from virginity, that most privileged form of chastity. If all of the forms of chastity enumerated here, including virginal martyrdom—that crowning act of both bodily and spiritual integrity—may be considered methods of sanctifying the body and soul, then every member of the Barking community, whether virgin, wife, or widow, might find her place. Indeed, this prayer suggests that the “bodies and souls” of all Barking’s varyingly chaste residents, whatever their previous experience, may become worthy “temples to Christ’s indwelling.”

then, medieval female religious virginity is arguably either a minority gender identity, or a locally specific inflection of “woman”; like any gender, it must be continuously performed and continuously reiterated in the performance of modesty and humility” (38).

³² To my knowledge, this prayer is not attested in any other manuscript, though according to Doyle, one of the collection’s texts, a “devout meditation” preceding the prayers to saints, did appear in another contemporary book: Cambridge University Library MS Hh.3.13, fols. 111v–112r (see Doyle, “Books Connected,” 242 n. 3).

³³ MS Add. 10596, fol. 71r–v, emphasis added.

The Virgin Mary, never far from view, is obliquely suggested in the above reference to the “motherly” prayers of virgin saints. As the prayer to virgins moves into a request for Mary’s own intercession, the text enfoldes her into the community of virgins and chaste wives, offering all would-be petitioners a chance to look toward a future celestial wedding with Christ. The prayer continues:

We pray and beseech the holiest mother of God, *who without peer or example is the holiest mother and virgin, and you also, as holy virgins, and all other wives who are continent on earth [wives temporally continent],* we pray to be nurtured, favored, taught, preserved, and defended with your holy prayers and assistance, so that we might flee from the uncontrollable desires of our members, and revive our souls to God . . . so that with God’s grace we may pass forth from good into better things, so that when our Lord shall come and knock, he will find us awake and ready, and hence lead us into the heavenly wedding feast, to be there with you forever at the rejoicings of angels.³⁴

With the Virgin Mary presiding, virginal status becomes notionally inseparable from continent wifely sexuality. The petition to “holy virgins, and all other wives who are continent on earth,” yokes these two groups together, suggesting that continent wives may themselves be considered a species of virgin. These wives constitute a group with their own inviolable form of chastity. Alluding to the biblical parable of the ten virgins from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, which anticipates that the “wise” virgins will be prepared to welcome Christ into the bride’s chamber at the moment when he is revealed in his glory at the end of time, this prayer hopes to usher physical and spiritual virgins, without distinction, into the privileged position of the wise virgins at the heavenly wedding feast.³⁵ At this final marriage, it seems, all will be permitted to wear white. Thus, spiritual marriage is anticipated as the culmination of virtuous life both for physical virgins and for those who remained continent wives during earthly life. For these continent wives, including perhaps nuns like Sibyl de Felton who joined Barking later in life, as well as other wives or former wives, all who move from “good into better things” will be able to remain in bliss, “there with you forever at the rejoicings of angels.” In this idealized picture the rewards for chastity, even in different forms, will be shared equally at the end of time. Taken as a whole, this remarkable prayer suggests, in keeping with

³⁴ Ibid., fols. 71v–72r, emphasis added.

³⁵ See also Payer, who summarizes Albert the Great’s theory of virginity: “There are three characteristics of virginity in the fully moral sense of the term: integrity from birth, resolve to safeguard that integrity, and the directing of that resolve to God. These features belong to the ideal type [innate virginity safeguarded by a religious vow of continence], but are not necessary conditions, since physical integrity may be lost but virginity retained” (*The Bridling of Desire*, 162).

Barking's culture of reciprocal, interdependent chastities, that in the final reckoning the category of virginity may prove expansive enough to enfold all of the book's potential readers.

These prayers were framed in the manuscript by two texts taken from the late-fourteenth-century Wycliffite English translation of the Bible: the stories of Tobit and Sara from the book of Tobit and the tale of Susannah and the elders from the book of Daniel. Their placement as bookends to the spiritual anthology is itself remarkable.³⁶ When copied together, these two texts, which featured the continent wives Sara and Susannah, emphasized particular forms of wifely chastity as exemplary for Barking sisters who might be reading the volume. Just as virgins became models for all women in the prayers considered above, faithful wives, who also featured prominently in those prayers, appeared here as potential models for virginal, married, and widowed nuns alike.

The story of Tobit and Sara, though little known today, was a popular Christian teaching text in the later Middle Ages. Erler calls it a "suspenseful" and "picaresque" story.³⁷ The hero of this book, Tobit, was renowned as an archetypal, pious Old Testament patriarch. Tobit and Sara's relationship provided one of medieval Christianity's most important emblems of married chastity in two senses: the couple abstained from sexual intercourse for three nights after their marriage vows, and they went on to enjoy a continent marriage. Their legendary marriage was durably linked to actual medieval marriage practices, for a section from the book, in which Sara's father performs their marriage, was commonly used in Western Christian marriage liturgies. As Dyan Elliott notes, some of these marriage ceremonies also encouraged newlywed couples to remain chaste like Tobit and Sara for three nights before consummating their marriage.³⁸

The story of Tobit was widely considered a text of basic moral formation for men in the later Middle Ages. As the prologue to the Wycliffite Bible put it, the book of Tobit teaches "simple men" "to do works of

³⁶ The book of Tobit and this part of the book of Daniel (chapter 13), included in the medieval Latin Vulgate Bible and the modern Catholic Bible, were excluded as noncanonical texts from Protestant Bibles. No other known extant English manuscript contains these particular two biblical selections without the rest of the biblical books, although one fifteenth-century manuscript contains the book of Tobit together with the book of Job (British Library, Manuscript Harley 3903), and another features Tobit alone (Oxford University, Bodleian Library, Manuscript Douce 36). See, on this point, Mary Dove, *The First English Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 290, 297.

³⁷ These terms are from Erler, *Women, Reading and Piety*, 4.

³⁸ Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 171. The passage is found in Tobit 7:15. See also Jean-Baptiste Molin and Protas Mutembe, *Le rituel du mariage en France du XIIe au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974), 123, 202, 248, 323. Elliott adds that in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, from which blessings of the nuptial chamber were sometimes taken, Christ appears to newlyweds to encourage total abstinence; see *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. M. R. James (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 369.

mercy and teach their children well, and to take wives in the fear of God, in the desire for children and not just for the sake of foul bodily lust, nor for covetousness of worldly things. And also, children must learn here from young Tobit to be meek, obedient, and ready to serve father and mother.”³⁹ Although the focus, as here, was usually on Tobit as a model for readers, in the Barking collection the figure of Sara became exemplary in complex ways for women. Sara enters the story with the paradoxical status of virginal widow, then experiences a brief period of marital abstinence, and ultimately lives as a faithful wife to Tobit. She thus embodies several forms of chastity in sequence, all potentially productive for the book’s enclosed female readers. As I noted earlier, Salih argues that “the nun’s brideship is continuous with the silent, obedient, private wifeness of secular women.” Sara’s own “silent, obedient, private wifeness,” together with that of Susannah, who appears at the end of the Barking volume, offered an example whose radical privacy and tenacious commitment to chastity might have translated readily into a pattern for various women of the enclosed female monastic life.

From the start, Sara embodies a multivalent form of chastity under threat: she is a beleaguered representative of married sexuality who has already been wed seven times before meeting Tobit. However, she has managed to remain virginal, because each previous husband, in his lecherous haste to consummate their marriage, has been incinerated by a devil: “She was given to seven husbands, and a devil named Asmodeus killed them as soon as they had entered her chamber.”⁴⁰ Although Sara feels shame as a result of this recurrent wedding night drama and is even slandered by her own housemaids, she remains convinced and protective of her own sexual purity. Significantly, at the start of the book it is to “the upper bedchamber of her house” that she retires, “and for three days and three nights, she neither ate nor drank, but persisted in tearful prayer and beseeched God to deliver her from this slander.”⁴¹ Although Sara remains in a secular domestic setting, her conduct adumbrates monastic asceticism, self-enclosure, and prayer. (As such, her behavior also anticipates that of pious laywomen like Elisabeth de Vere whose domestic performances of piety in this period had become almost indistinguishable from those of nuns.)

Performing what looks rather like monastic asceticism in her conduct and language, Sara defines her own behavior in terms of the radical self-discipline and purity expected of virginal nuns as she attempts, in private prayer to God, to exonerate herself from sexual sin. She beseeches:

³⁹ *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal books, in the Earliest English Versions Made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, ed. Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1850), 1:35, my translation. This passage is also cited in Dove, *The First English Bible*, 97.

⁴⁰ MS Add. 10596, fol. 29r.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 29r–v.

Lord, you know that I never coveted a man, and I have kept my soul clean from all covetousness. I never mingled with merrymakers, *nor did I join with those who live in unsteadfastness. But I consented to take a husband in fear of you, not according to my desire* [*neiper y zaf me partener wip hem þat goon in vnstabilnes, but y consentide to take an husbonde wip þi drede, not wip my lust*]. Either I was unworthy of them, or perhaps they were not worthy of me, for it may be that *you have preserved me for another husband* [*pou hast kepte me to an oþer husbounde*]. For your counsel is not in the power of man; truly, everyone who worships you knows this for certain, that if his life is spent in testing, he will be crowned; if he is in tribulation, he will be delivered; if he is in chastising, he will be allowed to come to your mercy.⁴²

Sara frames the defense of her chastity in terms that would have resonated strongly at Barking with the requirements of monastic discipline. Even as a secular married woman, avoiding illicit desire is Sara's uppermost priority, and her inclination to avoid "covetousness," or excessive desire for material goods, also recalled a key requirement of the monastic life according to the *Rule of Benedict*, the basic set of regulations for Benedictine monasteries like Barking.⁴³ For Sara to have "coveted a man" would have compounded the sin of covetousness with the deadly sin of lust, which she disavows later in the passage. Moreover, Sara's claim to have avoided "those who live in unsteadfastness" (*unstabilnes* in Middle English) is striking for its evocation of the monastic vow of stability (*stabilitas* in Latin), that is, the promise to remain in the monastic community for life.⁴⁴ For nuns living in the disciplinary world legislated by *Periculoso*, this promise not to leave the monastic house was explicitly linked, as seen in the text of the decree, to the maintenance of chastity. Thus, Sara, the widowed virgin, professes a form of spiritual, if not literal, stability that readers of this book (whether or not they had formally vowed *stabilitas*) would have done well to emulate.

In claiming that she "consented to take a husband in fear of you, not according to my desire," Sara also professes a spiritual rather than a fleshly approach to marriage. Moreover, in speculating that God may have saved Sara for a more fitting husband, her remark invited a productively double reading. While readers knew that on a literal level Sara must be referring to her future spouse Tobit, in a monastic context this other husband would have been Christ, every nun's spiritual spouse, the husband whom women of varied chastities also anticipated joining in heaven, as seen in the prayer "Of Virgins" from MS Add. 10596. Sara's discourse of "testing," "tribulation," and eventual crowning with glory also brings up the

⁴² Ibid., fols. 29v–30r, emphasis added.

⁴³ Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1981), 181–82. It is the sixth of what are known as the "tools of good works."

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, ed. Fry, 268–69.

ascetic trials of the religious life and the rewards that, according to the prayer, all spiritual virgins would receive eventually.

The passionate prayer voiced by Sara, a virginal widow looking forward to spiritual marriage, seems ready-made (and was carefully chosen) for reading in the monastic setting of Barking Abbey, where virgins, widows, and wives lived together in chastity. To read the story through a monastic lens is to see that Sara's "other husband" is at once Tobit and Christ, and as the book unfolds, her union with Tobit thus offers itself as instructive for the nun's "brideship" with Christ. Sara's marriage to Tobit is a spiritual union in which absolute chastity shades into faithful continence. Before the wedding night, the angel Gabriel, Tobit's faithful advisor throughout, requires that the marriage begin with radical chastity: after their vows, Tobit should enter the bedchamber "and for three days, abstain from sex with her [*be thou continent fro her*], and with her, pay attention to nothing but prayers."⁴⁵ The positions they take up in the bedchamber echoed the quasi-monastic, prayerful attitude that Sara had earlier assumed: the chaste bride and groom's first union takes place in their practice of joint devotions.

For Sara and Tobit, even as total abstinence shades into careful sexual relations, spiritual and physical integrity remain linked, and their marital chastity results in sanctified offspring. The Middle English terms chosen by the biblical translator proved particularly felicitous when considered in a monastic context. After their first night of prayers, Gabriel promises that the troublesome devil Asmodeus will be driven away. On the second night "*you shall be received into the joining of the holy patriarchs* [*þe complinge of þe holi patriarkis*]; truly, on the third night you shall obtain a blessing, *that holy sons* [*hooli soones*] *will be engendered of you*. But when the third night is past, you shall take the virgin with fear of our lord God, and you shall be led more by the desire for children than by lust, that in the seed of Abraham you will receive the blessing of sons."⁴⁶ In other words, their prayerful abstinence will usher Tobit and Sara into a blessed union; in turn, their spiritual chastity will ensure that their sons will emerge "holy [*hooli*]." While many Middle English manuscripts of the Tobit text read "hoole [healthy, sound] sones,"⁴⁷ offering a literal translation of the Latin Vulgate's *incolomes* (unharméd, unblemished), the Barking manuscript features the variant *hooli*—a reading that, whether an intentional change or a slight misreading, registered even more strongly the link between parental chastity and filial sanctity.

The term *hoole* did appear in MS Add. 10596 just before the long-awaited sexual union of Sara and Tobit. On the third night, as instructed by Gabriel, Tobit vows to "take Sara" in love of God rather than lechery, and Sara anticipates the long life of continent marriage that lies ahead: "Now, Lord, you know that I take my sister not for lechery, but only in the desire for heirs; . . .

⁴⁵ MS Add. 10596, fol. 35r–v.

⁴⁶ Ibid., fol. 35v, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ See *The Holy Bible*, ed. Forshall and Madden, 2:588.

therefore Sara said, 'Lord have mercy on us, have mercy on us, and *let us grow old together healthy* [*waxe we bope eelde togidre hool*]. *And it was done.*"⁴⁸ Here, the Middle English translation of Latin *sani* (healthy) reinforced a strong yet flexible connection between spiritual and physical integrity. The appearance of this term in the story of Sara immediately before the anticlimactic loss of her virginity ("*And it was done*") suggested that for women like her "wholeness" did not depend upon physical virginity.

As her paradoxical widowed virginity shades into a new life of continent wifehood, Sara served as a complex, useful model not only for virginal nuns but also for Barking readers who may themselves have been wives or widows but who had entered into spiritual virginity as professed nuns. Although the book of Tobit was ultimately concerned more with its eponymous hero than with his virtuous wife, within this Barking manuscript Sara stood out as the heroine. Her improbable yet successful movement along the spectrum of chastities, combined with her fervent devotion to God, made her a potential model for virtually any female reader of this book.

MS Add. 10596 features not one but two tales of continent wives. As the first and longest text copied into the anthology, the story of Tobit and Sara assumes the greatest prominence, but after the long sequence of prayers discussed above, the collection concluded with another prose selection: the story of the faithful matron Susannah from the book of Daniel. Although Susannah does not embody Sara's astonishing range of chaste experiences, in her heroic conduct she shares much in common with her biblical sister. A faithful wife, Susannah resists the advances of several lecherous elders, who surprise her in a garden, and when they are rebuffed, they proceed to slander her falsely for committing adultery with a young man. Like Sara, Susannah relies upon God (here through the interventions of the prophet Daniel) to preserve her reputation and her life when she is publicly accused of adultery.

Susannah's story, like Tobit's, offered a broad range of possible moral lessons to medieval Christians. As Alice Miskimin observes, "It was interpreted on many levels and in countless forms: as an authentic miracle, illustrating the reward of chastity, patience and faith; as an allegory of the blindness of men contrasted with the sacred innocence of the vision of a child; a lesson on the punishment of atheists; . . . as symbolic of the sufferings of the Church, or of the Christian soul in its dilemma of flesh and spirit."⁴⁹ Since Saint Augustine's influential fourth-century sermon on Susannah and the elders, her story had been widely interpreted as a lesson for married women in particular on the importance of cultivating fear of God as a means of internalizing a salutary sense of shame. Augustine argued that Susannah resists the advances of the elders not because of her inherent virtue but "because

⁴⁸ MS Add. 10596, fols. 37v–38r, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ *Susannah: An Alliterative Poem of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Alice Miskimin (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969), 199.

she was afraid of him whom she did not see, but whose divine eyes were nonetheless fixed on her; because she did not see God, does not mean that she is not seen by God.”⁵⁰ Thus, Elizabeth Clark argues, Susannah’s story taught Christians that God’s surveillance was unceasing and inescapable. As she puts it, “Shame thus serves as a self-protecting device: it keeps Christians from deeds that will warrant divine punishment. It encourages *both* sexes to develop the mechanism by which the omnipotent male gaze feminizes its objects of vision.”⁵¹ Clark traces the development of a Christian sexual ethic that, at least in theory, exacted the same standards from men and women and in which female martyrs (whom we saw invoked in the prayer to virgins from MS Add. 10596) became a means for shaming men to equal the women’s own standards of sexual asceticism.⁵²

A healthy sense of shame was critical for life in a monastic community, and public shaming served as an important tool in the administration of monastic discipline, as the *Rule of Benedict* attested.⁵³ But the impulse to public shaming coexisted with the rule not to bear false witness against a brother or sister.⁵⁴ This is the key lesson of Susannah’s story, which ends as follows in the manuscript: The loyal populace, recognizing her innocence, “rose up together against the two priests. For Daniel had convicted them with their own words, that they had borne false witness. And they did to the elders as [the elders] had done evil against their neighbor [Susannah] . . . and they killed them, and innocent blood was saved on that day.”⁵⁵

The Susannah story also took on an additional chastity-related significance in the women’s community at Barking. For Susannah’s trials also resonated with the customs of the abbey and with the other texts in this manuscript to foreground an instructive link between married chastity and monastic love of God. At the story’s moment of highest tension, Susannah’s wifely fidelity is publicly called into question as she and the community assert her commitment to married continence and her unstinting faith in God. When Susannah’s veiled head is rudely exposed so that the lecherous elders might “be satiated by her beauty,” the insult to her wifely dignity receives a prompt answer from her many allies: “All who knew her, except the two priests, rose up together amid the crowd, and set their hands on her head, and she wept and looked up to heaven, and her heart trusted in the Lord.”⁵⁶ At the very moment the community arises to defend her marital

⁵⁰ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon* 343.1, trans. Elizabeth A. Clark, in “Sex, Shame, and Rhetoric: En-gendering Early Christian Ethics,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1991): 236.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 237, emphasis in original.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 230–40.

⁵³ See Benedict of Nursia, *Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Fry, 242–43, for example, on the procedure for publicly shaming monks who arrive late for the office of vigils.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ed. Fry, 181–83.

⁵⁵ MS Add. 10596, fols. 81v–82r.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 79v.

continence against false witness, Susannah asserts her own faith that God will prove that innocence, too. Ultimately, Susannah is vindicated, while the deceitful judges are slain. Her faithful group of allies might be seen to stand for the monastic community at Barking, a group that would protect its members against false witness, which might emanate from within or outside its walls. Susannah's steadfast devotion to married chastity adumbrates the patient purity expected from nuns of all sexual statuses, whether virgins, widows, or wives. Thus, the chaste spirituality of married women took on an enhanced importance as a potentially fruitful model of monastic chastity and forbearance.

We can ultimately only speculate about the precise uses to which this unique devotional anthology was put within the cloister of Barking Abbey. We cannot know who copied the manuscript or who chose the selection of texts included in it. But the presence of these two nuns' names offers a strong suggestion of collective use and reading over several generations. Given the ways in which this remarkable book's contents encouraged virgins, widows, and wives to engage with each other and understand their experiences as mutually informing, we can imagine that a group of nuns may have compiled it for their own use and that it might have worked to encourage women across the spectrum of sexual experience to see themselves and each other as "temples to Christ's indwelling."