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Love, Ecgburg

Mary Wellesley

Diane Watt, a professor of medieval literature, shows that the earliest English women writers lived centuries before Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe.

October 22, 2020 issue

Reviewed:

Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond, 650–1100
by Diane Watt
Bloomsbury Academic, 238 pp., $95.00

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The writer Marie de France, who lived in England in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, pictured in a collection of poems in old French, from an illuminated manuscript copied in Paris circa 1285–1292

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At some point between 776 and 786, an English nun in the Bavarian monastery of Heidenheim wrote four lines in a

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secret code in the space between the end of one Latin text and the beginning of another. She was the author of both—accounts of the lives of Saints Wynnebald and Willibald—but had left them anonymous, describing herself at the start of one as no more than an "*indigna Saxonica*" ("unworthy Saxon woman"). The code was deciphered only in 1931, by the scholar Bernard Bischoff. Decoded and translated from the Latin, the line reads, "I, a saxon nun named Hugeburc, composed this." In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf observed that "Anon...was often a woman." Sometimes Anon was hiding in plain sight.

Hugeburc's authorship might strike you as surprising. Reading certain literary histories, you could be forgiven for thinking that ladies didn't do any authoring until more recent times. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1985 edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English* dismissed the medieval and early modern period as "the Dark Ages" of "the female imagination." But as Diane Watt, a professor of medieval literature at the University of Surrey, makes clear in *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond, 650–1100*, the history of English women's literature is older than popularly thought. It is as old as the history of "overwriting"—a kind of medieval textual mansplaining, whereby women's contributions were erased or refashioned by male authors.

Watt's study is an excavation. She uncovers evidence of female patrons, sources, and authors by forensically examining texts. Hugeburc's cipher, stitched into the join between two texts, has provided Watt an invitation to look closely at both the spaces between texts and the spaces around them, whether the manuscript page or the abbey environment. She turns her gaze on well-known material, like the Old English elegies or Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, as well as lesser-known and fragmentary works, like a *Life of Saint Mildrith*. Notably, she examines texts produced in England before the Norman Conquest of 1066 alongside those written in Europe by pre-Conquest English missionary nuns or abbesses. This is unusual; these texts, because they are deemed "Continental," are most often written about by historians of the Carolingian era—the era of Charlemagne (748–814) and his descendants.

But such artificial divisions fail to account for the interconnectedness of English and Continental literary and religious culture in the early medieval period. Despite modern myths of British exceptionalism, Britain has always been closely aligned to Europe. Much material from Britain, however, has been lost—destroyed during Viking raids, the Norman Conquest, and the dissolution of the monasteries during the English Reformation—so including the Carolingian sources gives us a broader sense of the intellectual sophistication and the lived experiences of early medieval English women.

Where does the history of English women's writing begin? Some would point to figures like Julian of Norwich, whose late-fourteenth-century *Revelations of Divine Love* was, it is believed, the first female-authored text in English, or Margery Kempe's *Book*, written in the early fifteenth century, which describes the author's life, travels, and visions of Christ. But the perception that Julian and Margery were among the earliest female English writers likely stems from a fetishization of writing in the English language and risks seeing the past as monolingual. (And this view skirts dangerously close to a nationalist interpretation of literary history.) If we are looking for women who wrote in English only, we are going to be disappointed. Two thirds of the surviving corpus of Old English poetry (that written before the Norman Conquest), which represents approximately six hundred years of literary culture, survives in four physical books. The scholar Roy M. Luizza called the remains of Old English literature the "flotsam and jetsam of a vanished world."

The first English woman to have written a full-length literary work was Hugeburc, some seven hundred years before Julian of Norwich. Her *Hodoeporicon (Itinerary) of Saint Willibald* describes the ten years the saint spent traveling to the Holy Land and beyond in the 730s. In the Latin text, which she prefaced with her coded lines, Hugeburc states at the start that she heard Willibald's account "from his own lips." She describes herself as "corruptible by the feminine frailty of the fragile sex" but adds—to give the account an authority that she, as a woman, does not have—that she heard it "in the presence of two deacons who will vouch for [its] truth."

Yet reading the *Itinerary* we see at once that the voice of Willibald has been wrapped in Hugeburc's literary casing. The text is bookended by elegant appeals to the reader, in which the anonymous Hugeburc reflects on the nature of her task. Here the sentences are long, the metaphors elaborate. In the opening we find an expression of the writer's humility, a common rhetorical device in medieval discourse: "it seemed to me surely shameful that a human voice should, in mute tenacity and with sealed lips, keep silent about these things our Lord deemed worthy to reveal." She writes that she is like "an inexperienced child…plucking a few things…from many leafy and fruitful trees with a variety of laden flowers." These horticultural metaphors appear again at the end when she describes how Willibald "with a few laborers…tilled the wide and spacious fields for the divine seed, sowing and cultivating them until harvest-time" like a "busy bee." There is a subtle resonance in the way she describes her authorial task and the "black traces of my pen which have ploughed through the white plains of the fields," meaning the manuscript pages.

Hugeburc's Latin is difficult. It has been described as "somewhat flawed," although some critics have called it "ambitious." Watt notes that "what is understood as evidence of more limited linguistic competence by one reader might be interpreted as innovation and experimentation by another." It is clear, regardless, that Hugeburc was highly educated and not the "inexperienced child" she claimed to be.

By contrast, the central section of the text—the part supposedly from the lips of Willibald himself—reads like clipped reportage. After traveling through "the country of the Samaritans," Willibald and his companions (who include "an Ethiopian with two camels, who led a woman on a mule") meet a ferocious lion, "ready to seize and devour them." The Ethiopian says, "Have no fear—let us go forward," and the lion decides not to eat them. This near-death experience is not reflected on. There are other moments—like a description of some cattle with "*longo dorso et brevis cruribus, magnis cornibus*" ("long back, short legs and large horns") or an account of passing the night "between two fountains" and drinking sour milk given them by a shepherd—that also appear to come from Willibald. These episodes feel too incidental and specific to have been added by a hagiographer. We sense Hugeburc's desire to report accurately rather than reframe or refashion the words of her source.

Willibald's seeming tendency not to embellish the events that have taken place and Hugeburc's studiedly noninterventionist approach to reporting them lead to moments of unintentional comedy. In a town called Emesa, Willibald and his companions are arrested by "pagan Saracens," or Arabs, and imprisoned. A kindly merchant then takes pity on them; he frees them from prison each day and takes them to the market, where the citizens of the town "come regularly to look at them, because they were young and handsome and clothed in beautiful garments."

Hugeburc's late-eighth-century work is the first extended piece of writing by an English woman, but Watt also discusses a group of earlier, shorter texts: ten letters in Latin, composed by a group of English nuns and abbesses, which date to the early to mid-eighth century. They are part of the so-called Boniface Correspondence—a collection of 150 letters written by and to Saint Boniface (circa 675–754), a missionary bishop sent from England to Germany. The ten women's letters are all addressed to Boniface and his follower Lul (circa 710–786). These missives are full of learned allusion and show an impressive degree of scholarship; some contain poetry. But more than that, they offer us glimpses of the hopes and terrors, as well as some of the prosaic daily realities, of women in eighth-century Europe. They all appear in a single manuscript in Vienna, in which they occupy an important position, evidently valued as models of letter-writing (the rest of the codex, which is made of four separate units, includes biblical books, poems, and legal material). This is something not reflected in modern editions of the Boniface Correspondence, which have tended to sideline the women's letters; some editions and translations just include the men's letters, and some of the women's correspondence has only recently become available in translation.

The letters to and from the women indicate how far people traveled in the medieval period—contrary to the popular perception that travel was rare—and they also show the pain of being far from home, friends, and news. They reveal bonds of intimacy between missionaries and their correspondents, and the respect that Boniface and Lul had for this group of highly educated women. One letter, written by a nun named Ecgburg and addressed to Boniface, is full of vivid metaphors. She writes of feeling "deprived" of Boniface's "bodily presence" and how she wishes to "ever clasp your neck in a

sisterly embrace." Reeling from the death of her brother, she tells Boniface that she holds him in "affection above almost all other men," that when she thinks of him her "very inmost soul is filled with a sweetness as of honey." She begs Boniface to "set me up upon the rock of your prayers; for you are become my hope, my tower of strength against my foes within and without." The source of her suffering becomes clear when we realize that not only has her brother died but her "dearest sister Wethburga" has "vanished." This is, she writes,

> a new wound and a new grief; she with whom I had grown up, whom I adored and who was nursed at the same mother's breast…everywhere was grief and terror and the dread of death. Gladly would I have died if it had so pleased God from whom no secrets are hid, or if slow-coming death had not deceived me.

Ecgburg describes this separation as "still more bitter" than death, one that left her sister "the happier and me the unhappy one to go on, like something cast aside, in my earthly service." She writes that Wethburga is "reported" to be living as an anchoress in a cell in Rome. Bemoaning her "unmeasured sorrow," she beseeches Boniface to "quiet the waves of my grief," writing that "more than the storm-tossed sailor longs for the harbor, more than the thirsty fields desire rain, or the anxious mother watches by the shore for her son, do I long for the sight of you."

Ecgburg's cries of anguish carry across the centuries. Reading them in lockdown, I too felt the toll that isolation takes. The pain of her physical separation is expressed at the end of the letter, where she begs Boniface for "a holy relic or at least a few written words," both tangible and intangible reminders of her friend. Many of the letters to and from the women of Boniface's circle describe such international gift-giving. These gifts took different forms—sometimes they were gifts of prayer, while in another case Abbess Cneuburg of Inkberrow near Worcester was asked to send two recently freed slaves to join the Christian mission in Germany.

One of the most famous letters in the Boniface Correspondence is from Boniface to Eadburg, the abbess of Wimborne in Dorset. In it, he asks her to make "a copy written in gold of the Epistles of my master, St. Peter the Apostle, to impress honor and reverence for the Sacred

Scriptures visibly upon the carnally minded to whom I preach." It is striking that Boniface specifically requests Eadburg's penwomanship. A manuscript was not simply a repository of text but an embodiment, in visual and physical form, of the sacral power of Scripture. Such an artifact could not be created by just anyone.

It was perhaps in recognition of her status as a celebrated scribe that a further letter states that Lul sent Eadburg a silver stylus. (He also sent her incense and cinnamon.) Scribes made ephemeral notes with styli in wax tablets before fair copies of texts were written on parchment. Styli would have been used too for administrative purposes (tallying and accounting, perhaps), but writers may have also made first drafts of texts with them.

Another letter, dated to the early 730s, suggests that Eadburg might have composed poetry with her silver stylus. It was written by Leoba, a nun from Wimborne (where Eadburg was abbess), and reads like a kind of eighth-century cover letter. In it Leoba introduces herself to Boniface, noting their shared kinship. She says that she has learned the art of poetry from Abbess Eadburg and includes a poem, which she says she wrote "only to exercise my little talents and needing your assistance." This makes Leoba the first named English female poet. And despite her humble entreaties, her letter was effective. Boniface subsequently invited her to travel to Germany. There he "entrusted her with leading the nuns in his mission," and she later became the abbess of Tauberbischofsheim.

Leoba is not the only poet in the collection of women's letters. Berthgyth, the daughter of one of Boniface's correspondents, also wrote verse in her mournful letters. In one of them, she begs her brother, Baltheard, to visit her: "O brother, o my brother, for what reason can you afflict my mind with grief, tears and sadness...day and night through the absence of your love?" Watt reads Berthgyth's letters alongside two famous female-voiced elegies written in Old English that appear only in a manuscript in Exeter Cathedral Library. These poems—editorially titled "Wife's Lament" and "Wulf and Eadwacer"—are enigmatic texts describing exile and loss. Both involve female speakers (indicated by female grammatical endings) separated from their loved ones. Who these loved ones are and why they are separated from the speakers has elicited

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much scholarly debate, in part because the poems' polysemous language makes them hard to translate. (The opening line of "Wulf and Eadwacer" contains a word that can be translated as "battle," "sacrifice," or "gift"—each lending a completely different meaning to the line.) The "Wife's Lament" appears to describe a woman who is separated from a lover or husband, who had earlier set out over the "tossing waves." After his departure she was made an outcast by her beloved's kin, forced to live under an oak tree in an "*eorðscræfe*" (earth-cave) amid dark valleys tangled with briars, where she meditates on all she has lost.

In "Wulf and Eadwacer" the speaker is separated from "Wulf," whom she addresses as "*Wulf min Wulf*" ("Wulf, my Wulf"), echoing Berthgyth's "O brother, o my brother." The identity of this Wulf remains unclear, though we are told that he goes on long journeys and that the rareness of his visits has made the speaker ill, much as Berthgyth was afflicted by her brother's absence. The speaker is on an island and guarded by "bloodthirsty men." In the final lines of the poem she asks, "*Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer*?" ("Do you hear me, Eadwacer?") *Eadwacer* means "property-watcher." It could be a name, or it could be a nickname. Is this the woman's husband, who is set up in opposition to the lover, Wulf? Or is it the same person as Wulf, who could be her husband? Or is Wulf her child?

The poem ends, enigmatically, "*þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs,/uncer giedd geador*" ("that may be easily separated which was never bound,/the song of us both together"). These mournful lines strike a less hopeful note than a line from one of Berthgyth's letters in which she tells her brother, "many are the congregations of waters between me and you, yet let us be joined in love because true love is never divided by the borders between places."

The "Wife's Lament" and "Wulf and Eadwacer" are vernacular poems, written in the alliterative meter characteristic of Old English verse. They describe a secular setting—what appears to be a bloodstained society held together by bonds of patriarchal kinship. The anguish of their speakers is different from the anguish of missionary nuns. Watt does not explicitly argue for the female authorship of the Old English poems, but reading the letters and the elegies side by side might embolden us to see the elegies as female-authored too, although we have to be wary that the definition

of "author" in such cases is a slippery one. These vernacular texts likely circulated orally for some time before they were copied down, perhaps centuries later, probably in a monastic setting. And as Watt repeatedly notes, authorship in the premodern period was often collaborative.

Some of the most complex and necessarily speculative discussion in Watt's study is in her exploration of "overwriting," whereby female-authored texts were essentially plagiarized by male authors. Overwriters' intentions, she argues, were sometimes benign. At times they simply wanted "to preserve rather than obliterate, to modernize rather than to silence." Bede's *Ecclesiastical History,* completed in 731, contains the lives of three early abbesses. In them the "Venerable" Bede filleted out what he needed from his source material, shaping the abbesses' stories into a form that suited his aims. He glides over the twelve sexless years of the saintly Æthelthryth's married life, preferring to focus instead on her cloistered existence and to present her as a model of chastity.

In each of these accounts he probably used sources that originated in these abbesses' own institutions and that were either female-authored or based on female testimony. But this source material is never cited, probably because he felt it lacked authority. When he describes the discovery of Æthelthryth's divinely preserved corpse, he does not cite the testimony of her sister Seaxburh—who was by then an abbess and who had ordered the body to be disinterred; instead the words of Bishop Wilfrid and the physician Cynefrith are taken as ultimate confirmation of the miracle. Just as Hugeburc did not wish to embellish the spare account that the saintly Willibald gave her by inserting her own dubious female interventions, so too Bede seems to have feared that only male accounts could be trusted.

In her discussion of these three abbesses from Bede, and elsewhere in her study, Watt paints a picture of the female religious houses of early medieval England as communities of highly educated, intellectually engaged women. She points to the earliest version of the anonymous *Life of Gregory the Great*, which was commissioned by Abbess Ælfflæd of Whitby Abbey and could have been authored by a woman or, indeed, several women. Female-authored or not, the text reminds us of the contributions of women as patrons of texts, and the importance of religious houses as textual breeding grounds.

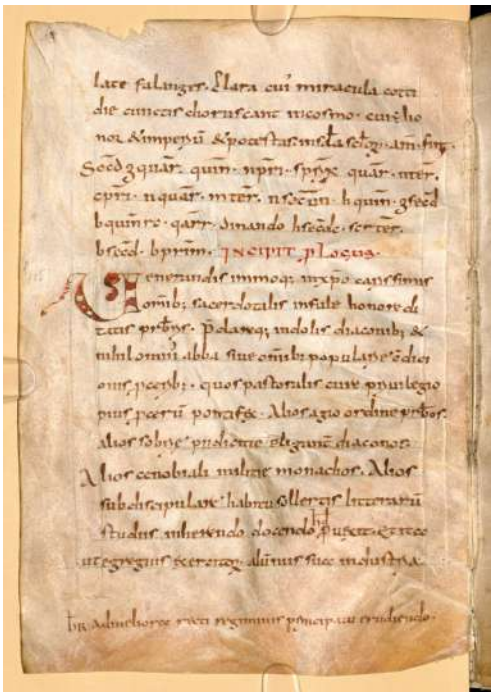
These were places that often nurtured the memory of their foremothers, gathering testimony that was used by later male authors, as in the case of Goscelin of St. Bertin's *Legend of Edith,* which was commissioned by the nuns of Wilton Abbey. Goscelin would no doubt have relied on female testimony or earlier female-authored accounts.

Watt's work is exciting because it asks us to look afresh at surviving material, but it also reminds us how much has been lost. Around the year 705, Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury, dedicated a treatise to Abbess Hildelith and her nuns at Barking Abbey. The prologue of the work describes the lively correspondence Aldhelm had with the Barking community. He describes their letters' "rich verbal eloquence and the innocent expression of sophistication," and imagines them "roaming widely through the flowering fields of Scripture" and "scrutinizing with careful application the hidden mysteries of the ancient laws." Unfortunately, only one side of the correspondence survives: the letters of the nuns are lost.

Women's contributions to medieval literary culture have been obscured for complex and various reasons, and misconceptions remain about their involvement in literature in the premodern period in Europe as both creators and consumers. Watt's study ends in 1100, but misconceptions govern the entire medieval period. There is a common assumption, for instance, that the first women authors were nuns who, educated in Latin at a convent in order to read scripture, learned to write only in order to write about God. This is not the case; Julian of Norwich may have been a nun before she became an anchoress—a self-imprisoned hermit—but the evidence suggests she was not. Scholars remain uncertain about what level of formal education she had received before she was permanently enclosed in a cell to live a life of prayer and contemplation. Margery Kempe was a vowess (someone who took unofficial religious vows) but was subjected to trials and interrogations by ecclesiastical authorities.

Watt's study explores medieval religious houses as places that nurtured literary production, but it helps to dispel the myth that medieval female authors were all nuns or wrote only about God; certainly many were connected to religion in some way, but not all. We know almost nothing about the writer Marie de France, who lived in England in the late twelfth and

early thirteenth centuries and wrote in Anglo-Norman, the language of the educated elite in post-Conquest England. She might have been a nun or a noblewoman, but her verse is not confined to religious subjects; she wrote about love and sex and beasts, real and magical. Then at the very end of the medieval period in Britain, the Welsh poet Gwerful Mechain—who was a woman of the gentry—wrote religious verse but also addressed secular subjects, including domestic violence and misogyny. Possibly her best work is the ode she wrote to the vagina, in which she attacks male poets for the "fruitless praise" they heap on women's hair, eyebrows, and breasts, all while failing to commend the "snug vagina…tender and lovely," the "girl's thicket" found beside a "lavish arse."



Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich

A page from the English nun Hugeburc's accounts of the lives of Saints Wynnebald and Willibald, circa 776–786. The fourth through seventh lines include a code identifying her as the texts' author.

If we take a wider European view, we have a host of further examples: a group of female troubadors (*trobairitz*) including the early thirteenth-century noblewoman Garsenda, Countess of Provence, and the late-twelfth-century Comtessa de Dia. In the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century we have Christine de Pizan, a poet at the court of Charles VI of France, who wrote verse in order to support her family after the death of her husband. Her *Book of the City of Ladies*, completed in 1405, was written as a rebuttal to the misogynistic depiction of women in Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*. In her *Book*, a dream-vision, Christine is visited by three personified virtues—Reason, Rectitude, and Justice—who tell her to build a metaphorical city to house a catalogue of famous, worthy women from history. Her words are the bricks that build a city to protect women from attack.

Another popular misconception is that only medieval women attached to religious orders were literate. There is, however, evidence that royal and noble women in the early medieval period may have been able to read. In his biography of King Alfred (871–899), Asser tells a story about how the king's mother, Osburh, offered a book of English poems to whichever of her children could learn them fastest. Alfred

won. From this it seems likely that Osburh could read; how else would she verify the winner? It also suggests she may have played a part in educating her children. A surviving list from Wissembourg Abbey, in France, dated to the same period as Alfred, details books lent out to several female borrowers, some of whom appear to be lay women. And in the earliest surviving will written by an Englishwoman (from the first half of the tenth century), the testator—Wynflæd—bequeaths her books to her daughter, which suggests that they were both able to read. Later, in the thirteenth century, the chronicler Matthew Paris lent copies of his works to a series of aristocratic women, recording the loans in his own hand in a copy of his *Life of Saint Alban*.

Female literacy greatly expanded from around the fifteenth century onward, when lay literacy in general expanded. We have to be cautious, however, about what "literacy" means. Women may have been taught to read but not write (the "Paston Letters" of the fifteenth century contain a cache of letters by Margaret Paston, who could read but had to dictate all her communications to scribes). Some women might have only been taught to read their Latin prayerbooks. Others could read the vernacular with varying levels of competence. But being illiterate was no impediment to composing literature: Margery Kempe dictated her work to several scribes. Addressing these misconceptions is not part of Watt's brilliant study, but tackling them shows us that the literary past is often richer and more interesting than we imagine.

Women's contributions have also been obscured because of the particular ways in which we understand and valorize authors. Watt's study draws attention to the fickle ways they come to be remembered or forgotten. Today we fetishize the idea of an author—the single (often male) creative genius. But authorship in the medieval period was frequently collaborative and, in fixating on the idea of the author, we forget the contributions of women as, in Watt's words, "patrons and commissioners of works, as scribes and archivists, and as recipients and readers."

Female writers have also been sidelined because of the nature of manuscript transmission. Were it not for her cipher, Hugeburc's texts would probably have remained anonymous, like so many texts from the medieval period. She would have been forever nameless, no more than a self-described "*indigna*

Saxonica." It was only by embedding a clue to her identity in her text that her name has survived. When manuscripts were copied, there was no guarantee that an author's name, which could appear in a rubric at the head of the text, would be carried over to subsequent versions. When we open a modern, printed book today we are greeted by an array of extratextual material that conditions our reading experience. A medieval person opening a manuscript often had few of these hints: no titles, no authors' names, nothing like a publisher or place of publication. Reading a medieval manuscript might be like watching a movie when you don't know anything about the film's title, genre, or actors.

The anonymous eighth-century *Life of Gregory the Great* tells readers that if they find mistakes in the text, they should not "nibble with critical teeth at this work of ours which has been diligently twisted into shape by love rather than knowledge." I thought of these words often reading *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond.* It is an ambitious and refreshing work that will still remain shapely after extensive nibbling, infused as it is with scholarly knowledge and a love for English literary "foremothers." ■

Mary Wellesley

Mary Wellesley's book about the human stories contained in medieval manuscripts will be published next year. (October 2020)

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