

A Syon Scribe Revealed by Her Signature: Mary Nevel and Her Manuscripts

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In discussions of nuns' scribal literacies in late medieval England much attention has been paid to the contrasts between England and continental Europe. Such differences operated at various economic, religious, and social levels.¹ None of these contrasts shows England in a good light.² When compared with Europe, there are differences in the educational facilities; in the size, wealth, and location of nunneries; in the limited range of orders found; in the meagre survival rates of manuscripts or indeed the houses themselves; in the increasing reliance on commercial book production amongst England's religious (both male and female); and, above all, in the poor evidence for scribal activity amongst English nuns from the fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. More manuscripts survive for Syon than for any other English nunnery, but comment on writing amongst the nuns is incidental or non-existent.³ Unlike continental Birgittine houses, Syon *appears* not to follow the female fashion for in-house manuscript production. Indeed, it is obvious from the evidence that does survive that Syon nuns were not reluctant to ask for outside help. Albeit living alongside Birgittine brothers who should have been adept scribes, when manuscripts were needed, the nuns tended to favour the Carthusians, go to secular outlets, or have material adapted, unlike their Swedish counterparts who produced the manuscripts themselves or enlisted the aid of the brothers for translational activity.⁴ Given the wealth of female Birgittine scribal activity throughout Europe from Vadstena to Paradiso in Florence, English Birgittine nuns seem to have more in common with other English religious than they do with their European sisters: Syon nuns, like other English nuns (and some male religious), would seem *not* to have produced their own material as a general rule.

Alongside the one definite example of anonymous female scribal activity from Syon, a devotion and colophon by the so-called 'srybeler' in London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS

¹ O'Mara 2013, O'Mara 2015, and O'Mara forthcoming.

² European norms for female religious literacy are variable, but England in the late Middle Ages (though less so in the Anglo-Saxon period) would figure at the lower end of the spectrum; for an overview, see the introduction to Blanton, O'Mara, and Stoop forthcoming.

³ See Bell 1995, pp. 171–210, supplemented by Bell 2007; he lists forty-eight volumes, including ten printed books and one of manuscript/print, associated with Syon nuns, a further ten manuscripts and two printed books that may have belonged to the sisters, plus untraced books and other references.

⁴ See, amongst others, Hedlund 2003, Hedström 2009, Dverstorp 2010, Hedström 2010, Lindell 2010, and Hedström 2013.

546, there are only two named Birgittine nuns who may fully be called scribes: one at the beginning and one at the end of the period.⁵ The first is Anna Karlsdotter (d. before 1450), anglicized as Anna Charles in the Syon Martyrology (London, British Library, MS Additional 22285), who was responsible for a Latin and Swedish prayer-book (Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, MS A82a), as brought to light by Claes Gejrot.⁶ Given that she was one of the four professed sisters who came from Vadstena to help establish Syon, it would be easy to conclude that later English postulants learnt something about manuscripts from Anna and perhaps her fellow Swedes, but there is no proof. Even if we suppose that there were other (anonymous) Syon nuns with scribal interests in the interim, it is not until a century later that we get our second authentic female scribe: Mary Nevel.

She was first brought to our attention by Christopher de Hamel who says that Mary was perhaps chantress at Syon and would have had responsibility for updating liturgical books.⁷ It is not clear to which of the many extensive families of Nevel (or Neville) she belonged.⁸ Her profession date too has been a mystery until now; all that was previously known was that Mary was not professed by 2 September 1518 because she was not present at the election of Constance Brown as abbess.⁹ Ironically, there is more information about Mary after Syon closed than before. She was one of the nuns in Agnes Jordan's Southlands community in Denham (Buckinghamshire) after the Dissolution in 1539.¹⁰ Mary was the only female witness to Agnes's will (which would bolster her literacy credentials), though there are no books in the bequest to her — indeed, books rate very little mention.¹¹ Following the death of

⁵ See O'Mara 2013, p. 78. There are a few examples of contemporary Syon nuns who were involved in some literary activity; for example, Bell 1995, p. 176, notes Dorothy Codrington, *alias* Goodrington, one of the well-known Fetiplace sisters, who annotates a 1535 printed copy of *A deuout treatyse called the tree and xii. frutes of the holy goost*; I hope to follow this up in my ongoing study of Syon scribal literacy. Moreover, the *Spirituall Exercyses* by the Dominican William Peryn (prefaced on 31 December, 1555 and published in 1557) was dedicated to Katherine Palmer (d. 19 December 1576), the abbess during the exile in Dendermonde, and to a Poor Clare, Dorothy Clement; see Erler 2012, and Erler 2013, pp. 108–113, and *passim*.

⁶ Gejrot 1994.

⁷ de Hamel 1991, p. 108.

⁸ She has not been identified by Syon historians; see, for instance, Bainbridge 2010a and Bainbridge 2010b. I am grateful to Virginia Bainbridge for generous advice in this matter.

⁹ Those present are given in the register of the Bishop of London, Richard Fitzjames (1506–22) in London, Metropolitan Archives, MS 9531/9, fols 128v–130r/fols 130v–132r (two systems of foliation).

¹⁰ For a comprehensive account of the Southlands community, see Cunich 2014.

¹¹ For the will, drawn up on 28 October 1545 and probated on 9 February 1546, see The National Archives, Prob. 11/31/52.

the abbess on 29 January 1546, the Southlands community departed for the Low Countries, arriving at various stages between 1550 and 1552. Previous commentators have mistranslated the source, the continuation of the chronicle of Marie van Oss (d. 1507), the abbess of Dendermonde (or Termonde) so that two arrival dates were confusingly postulated for Mary: the feast of St Margaret (20 July) and the feast of St Anne (26 July), 1552. In fact Mary arrived in Maria Troon in Dendermonde on 31 October 1552 with Margaret Mannington and Anne Dancy. The source further adds the valuable information that Mary was not professed until 3 April, 1535.¹² She returned with four other nuns to be re-instated at Syon in August 1557 with some other dispersed sisters and brothers. Yet her return was very brief as she died on 17 October 1557 or 1558 (both years are given in the Syon Martyrology).¹³ In the autumn of 1558 there was a devastating influenza epidemic that would seem even to have contributed to the death of Mary I (Mary Tudor) on 17 November.¹⁴ This might suggest that 1558 is the date for Mary Nevel's death; conversely, it could be that the person who noted her burial decided that the correct date must be 1558 solely because of the epidemic. Considering that fuller information is provided in the earlier entry, it may be that 1557 is the more likely. Bell provides one other detail: Göttingen University Library, 4^o Theol. Mor. 138/53 Inc., containing *The chastysing of goddes chyldern* and *The tretyse of loue*, both printed in c. 1493, was given by Mary Nevel to Audrey Dely (d. 19 April 1579), who inscribes the book to this effect.¹⁵ This is all that is currently known about Mary's biography. Unlike continental

¹² See Sander Olsen 2002, p. 312: '(fol. 44v) Item op Alderheleghen avent xv.c.liij qvamen by ons noch drie zusters uuyt Ynghelant, Zuster Mergriete Manniton ende Zuster Anne Danse, ende deze twee waeren gheprofest met Zuster Dorethe Slecs voerscreven den vij dach in hoeymaent, ende die derde Zuster die met Sr. Mergrieten ende Sr. Anne qvam, Zuster Marie Neuels, ende was gheprofest te Pasche, den iij apriel daernae xv.c.xxxv' ['Item on All Saint's Eve 1552 another three sisters came to us from England, Sister Margaret Mannington and Sister Anne Dancy, and these two were professed with Sister Dorothy Slight aforementioned on 7 July, and the third sister, who came with Sister Margaret and Sister Anne, [was] Sister Mary Nevel, and [she] was professed at Easter, 3 April thereafter 1535'] (that is, the Saturday after Easter Sunday). I am grateful to Patricia Stoop for help with this translation.

¹³ In the Syon Martyrology (London, British Library, MS Additional 22285) one hand on fol. 60r records her death as 17 October 1557; another on fol. 192r notes her burial 'propre murum' with a different year, 1558, and the same day but no month (it has been scratched out); see Gejrot 2015, pp. 121–122 and 156–157, and Forbes 2013, pp. 87 and 90.

¹⁴ The ultimate cause of the death of Mary Tudor would seem to have been uterine cancer, but her system was probably weakened in the summer and autumn of 1558 by the influenza outbreak; see Weikel 2008.

¹⁵ Bell 1995, p. 187. Audrey Dely was the sister of Margaret Dely (d. 10 October 1561), the Syon treasurer and the only Syon nun, with the exception of Agnes Jordan (whose brass plaque is in Denham church), to be commemorated by an extant memorial (in Isleworth church).

Birgittines, who are often explicit about their scribal involvement, the evidence for Mary's work has to be built up solely on detailed palaeographical grounds.

Following Christopher de Hamel's researches and those of Neil Ker, plus a study by Alexandra Barratt, I have compiled a list of manuscripts that may be associated with Mary Nevel.¹⁶ De Hamel unearthed the first clue by locating Mary's ownership inscription in Oxford, St John's College, MS 167 and by pointing to a few manuscripts in which he traced or suspected her involvement.¹⁷ The remainder of this essay will be devoted to retracing his footsteps and those of fellow palaeographers, while making known my own views and discoveries. Nine manuscripts or parts thereof will be discussed, in the following order and in three separate categories (de Hamel's list; other Latin liturgical manuscripts; devotional volumes): (1) Oxford, St John's College, MS 167; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 62; and London, British Library, MS Additional 22285; (2) Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 8885; Edinburgh University Library, MS 59; Exeter University Library, MS 262/ Fragments 5 and 7, Syon Abbey medieval and early modern manuscript collection (or Fragments 4a and 4b according to the best catalogue description); and The Archives of the Duke of Northumberland at Alnwick Castle, DNP: MS 505A; and (3) London, British Library, MS Harley 494; and London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3600.¹⁸

The flyleaf of St John's, MS 167 (fol. ii recto) shows Mary's ownership inscription, 'Syster mare. Neuel.', alongside that of 'syster tomysyn grove' and 'Brother James Stock', followed by a musical gamut in another hand (this same musical gamut also occurs, in the same hand, on the pastedown of the inside cover). (Figure Ia: Ownership inscriptions, Oxford, St John's College, MS 167, fol ii recto. Reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford). Brother James Stock has not been identified, but it may be presumed that Thomasina Grove (who died in 1566) walked in procession with Mary as Syon sisters apparently shared the same processional, and/or she and later James Stock inherited the book after Mary's death. The nuns processed in pairs in the order of their profession, with the abbess and prioress together, and the chantress and sub-chantress also making up a pair, so if Mary were the chantress, perhaps Thomasina Grove was the sub-chantress (which might also explain the music).¹⁹ As may be seen, the three signatures are in different hands which give a clear assurance that they are actually those of the people named

¹⁶ See de Hamel 1991, Ker 1977, and Barratt 2009.

¹⁷ For a description see Hanna 2002, pp. 232–234.

¹⁸ A very preliminary mention of these findings may be found in O'Mara forthcoming.

¹⁹ See de Hamel 1991, p. 86, for this information on the processional order.

(something that is not always the case).²⁰ While the other two are in competent cursive hands, Mary's very elegant *textualis* script is particularly noteworthy — and not only when compared with the hands here but also in comparison with other English nuns' signatures. In her choice of a *textualis* script she has more in common with her Swedish contemporaries than with her countrywomen. Whereas the brothers in Sweden used *cursiva* for most of their material, the sisters opted for *textualis* for Latin and *hybrida* for the vernacular; Mary goes one better in choosing *textualis* for English and Latin.²¹ Her hand demonstrates some of the classic features of *textus quadratus*, the highest form of *textualis* (*formata*) best described by Albert Derolez:

Textus Quadratus [...] is an extremely angular script mostly used for great Bibles and liturgical books [...] It stands at the top of the hierarchy of Gothic scripts. Minims were given a diamond-shaped serif or quadrangle at both the headline and the baseline, made with a separate penstroke which required great care [...] When well executed, these applied quadrangles touch each other at their lateral points when several minims occur in sequence, and thus create two highly conspicuous horizontal rows of similar forms, one at the headline, the other at the baseline. In this way the strong sense of a horizontal line [p. 75] is produced, which contrasts with the heavily vertical emphasis characteristic of this type of script, and contributes to the extraordinary dynamism of an otherwise stereotyped script.²²

To demonstrate the effort put into the execution of this script, Derolez includes a pattern book dated 1510 by Gregorius Bock from Swabia where, for instance, the letter 'a' alone comprises six different strokes.²³ In Mary's signature (see Figure Ia) the formality of the script is very evident both in general and particular: the overall symmetry, regularity, and angularity; the carefully executed minims; the conventional diamond-shaped full stop (which occurs after her first name and surname); and the general professionalism. In many ways this hand is so representative of its script type that to attempt further identification of it elsewhere seems futile. Yet, there is just enough singularity to enable such identifications. The most

²⁰ This problem is discussed in O'Mara 2013, pp. 79–81.

²¹ Dverstorp 2010, p. 168.

²² Derolez 2003, pp. 74–75. The three other kinds of *textualis* outlined by Derolez are *Textus Praescissus*, *Textus Semiquadratus*, and *Textus Rotundus*; he also notes further refinements by Wolfgang Oeser (pp. 75–76 and 85–86).

²³ *Ibid.*, plates 15–16.

obvious identifying features are the noticeable serifs at the bottom of the letter-forms. Whereas there should be perfect quadrangles at the baseline, there are serifs on virtually all these quadrangles; these look like drips from the pen, in some cases resembling something akin to a club-foot leading off to the right, but are clearly a characteristic of Mary's style. The letter 'y' in 'Syster' has a diamond-shaped dot over it and, most obviously, an idiosyncratic teardrop loop at the tip of the descender. These, combined with the size of the individual letter forms (also a useful indication of the number of lines that will fit on a page) and the appearance of the only capitals, 'S' and 'N', all help to contribute to isolating Mary's hand elsewhere. Although a full stop and fifteen letters (or in reality only eleven as there are some repeated forms) are very little to go upon, by identifying Mary's hand in other texts, a dossier of different letter-forms and features may be built up.

In the first category the first example of the possible occurrence of Mary's hand elsewhere is in St John's, MS 167 itself where de Hamel argues that she is responsible for amendments in the midst of the litany on fols 80v–90r (there are also a few added slips elsewhere). The changes in the litany are not corrections to the main text in the normal sense but are on added slips of parchment (whose reverses are blank) bound into the manuscript labelled 'a', 'b', and so on; these contain extra saints' names and are foliated in modern pencil. The slips between fols 80v and 83r are numbered 81 and 82; those between fols 83v and 86r are numbered 84 and 85; and those between fols 86v and 90r are numbered 88, 87, and 89 (in that order). (Figure Ib: Added slips, Oxford, St John's College, MS 167, fol. 84. Reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford.) For instance, slip 'a' (fol. 84) contains the names of Saints Anna, Birgitta, 'Katherina' (Katarina), and Elizabeth that rightly belong on fol. 86r (see Figure Ib). It would seem plausible that if Mary were not responsible for the main manuscript (which she is not), then if she were the chantress, she would be the person obliged to include additional saints in the litany. Yet, as with beauty being in the eye of the beholder, so it may be with palaeographical comparisons: in this case I do not agree with de Hamel's assessment. In my opinion, the hand on the inserted slips, though not the same as the main script, resembles Mary's hand but is a different sort of rounder *textualis*. The most obvious difference is that it lacks the tell-tale serifs on the quadrangles at the baseline. (Figure Ic: Material written by Mary Nevel. Oxford, St John's College, MS 167, fol. 116r. Reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of St John's College, Oxford.) In contrast to de Hamel, I think that Mary's hand is responsible for more extensive script on fols 110r–120r that is not mentioned by him. This contains material for the Circumcision, Annunciation, Corpus Christi, St Katarina, and Advent. Throughout

this section the same sort of pronounced feet with the noticeable serifs characteristic of Mary's hand are present; see, for example, fol. 116r (see Figure 1c).

For his second example de Hamel posits that Mary Nevel's hand is responsible for substantial sections (fols 29r–31r, 63r–79v, 149r–153r) of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 62, a 'late fourteenth-century Book of Hours acquired and adapted by Syon' about a century later; according to an inscription on the flyleaf (fol. ii verso), this was owned by John Barcham of Exeter in 1597, and it was apparently donated to the Bodleian in 1602.²⁴ (Figure 2: Material not written by Mary Nevel. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 62, fol. 30r.

Reproduced with the permission of The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford.) Like St John's, MS 167, this manuscript immediately looks like a Birgittine one as it has well-preserved Syon index tabs; in places the colours of the woven tabs (blues, reds, and so forth), are still quite bright.²⁵ The hand is again a good example of a *textus quadratus*, demonstrating the features outlined by Derolez. Some of the same characteristics found in the bookmarks in the Syon Martyrology (below) are evident in the section on fol. 30r (see Figure 2): the same zig-zag on the left of the capital letters as well as the single or double vertical strokes in these capitals — seen, for instance, in the 'O' in the heading 'Ora pro nobis *beata mater birgit*'. What are not obvious are the pronounced quadrangles at the baseline with their noticeable serifs. They are there but not to the same extent as found in the signature and examples from St John's, MS 167. Neither does this example compare with Mary's usual large script; as we shall see, she tends to fit very few lines on a page, about twelve to fourteen whereas on fol. 30r there are nineteen (of course, such comparison assumes that all pages are of comparable size). There is enough in the way of general features that might persuade one that this is Mary's hand, but there are perhaps not enough of the particular characteristics, even leaving aside that her distinctive letter 'y' is never going to appear in a Latin text. There is also one other issue. The added prayers elsewhere (by another hand) are in the masculine form which would presuppose use by a Birgittine brother.²⁶ This too casts some doubt over Mary as scribe here, unless she worked on manuscripts intended for sisters and brothers, which would be highly unusual. On balance my view is that Mary was not responsible for the parts of this manuscript highlighted by de Hamel, though the hand closely resembles hers.

²⁴ de Hamel 1991, pp. 102 and 108; see also pp. 76–77, 105, and 117. Another example of this hand is found on fol. 116r–v, though it is questionable whether or not fols 149r–153r are in the same hand; it is even possible that there are two further hands here. A brief description of the manuscript is available in Madan & Craster 1922, p. 175.

²⁵ For index tabs, a feature of books for men and women, see de Hamel 1991, pp. 103–106.

²⁶ See, for example, fols 105v ('*mihi peccatori*') and 109v ('*ego miserrimus peccator*').

In his third instance de Hamel notes that Mary's hand seems to be responsible for two book-marks in the Syon Martyrology (London, British Library, MS Additional 22285).²⁷ The first (numbered 11–12 pasted together, with each page having the same text), currently suspended between fols 10 and 13, is inscribed with the variant Latin forms that the reader of the Martyrology would need to adapt appropriately for reading names aloud to the Syon Chapter. The second (numbered 121–123, with the same text each side, that is, on numbers 120 and 123), presently suspended between fols 119 and 124, consists of a double volvelle, with two revolving disks (numbers 120 and 122) showing numbers through little windows that refer backwards or forwards to other sections during public reading of the Martyrology.²⁸ (Figure 3: Bookmark by Mary Nevel. London, British Library, MS Additional 22285, no.11. © The British Library Board). If the hand in the first bookmark (number 11) is examined carefully (see Figure 3), we can see that it has various distinctive features: the use of a sort of triple zig-zag on the left of the capital letters — for instance, in the 'Objt', 'Benefactor', 'Diaconus', as well as a single vertical line or a double vertical line in capitals, for instance, in 'Diaconus' and 'Diaconi'. These features may prove useful in later identifications, but such elaborate capitals are not uncommon in *textus quadratus* scripts, as seen in the Bodleian, MS Bodley 62 example. The problem is to isolate the general from the particular, though it is only possible to build up a scribal profile by examining the two in combination, even if at different points the proportion of what is particular or general will vary. Here there is the very obvious diamond-shaped full stop and more or less the same capital 'S' in 'Sorores' that Mary used for her signature. Most particularly, and unlike the Bodley example, there are the pronounced serifs at the baseline throughout. I therefore agree with de Hamel in accepting these two additions to the Martyrology as another example of Mary's hand, though there would seem to be no other instance of her writing amongst the many hands in this extensive volume.

In the second category the next four examples of Mary's hand comprise parts or fragments of liturgical manuscripts. The identification of the first, a section of Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 8885, is absolutely certain in my view and this claim is also indirectly supported by the researches of Neil Ker.²⁹ (Figure 4: Additions by Mary Nevel.

²⁷ de Hamel 1991, p. 108.

²⁸ See Wordsworth & Littlehales 1910, pp. 279–281 for a full description of these.

²⁹ The manuscript was originally owned by Bristol Baptist College; for the description of Z.d.40 (now the Cambridge manuscript) see Ker 1977, pp. 194–195; in his description (p. 199) of another Bristol Baptist College manuscript, Z.e.37 (now the Lambeth manuscript), he says that the hand is 'apparently the same hand as Z.d.40, art. 11' (that is, pp. 220**–231).

Cambridge, University Library, MS Additional 8885, fol. 230r. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.) The manuscript, the second of Syon's five extant processional, was mistakenly said by James Hogg to have been written by Anne Amersham (d. 21 October 1533), but it only has her ownership inscription alongside that of Anne Digne in the same hand.³⁰ The fact that the hand of Mary's ownership inscription in St John's, MS 167 occurs in the Syon processional here is not mentioned by de Hamel, as far as I am aware.³¹ Nevel's additions occur on pp. 220**–231 (the asterisks indicate duplicated folio numbering) and comprise the procession for the Feast of the Holy Name. The same double vertical line noted in the Syon Martyrology above also occurs in 'Benedicta' in the final line (see Figure 4). This lacks the zig-zags on the left, though these occur, for instance, in 'Oremus' on p. 231, demonstrating that Mary has different forms of capitals. Most importantly, the script here is notable, not only for her usual lower-case letter forms and features such as hair-line strokes over the 'i', but particularly for having the same pronounced serifs at the baseline so characteristic of her.

Secondly, there is a single added folio at the end of Edinburgh University Library, MS 59 that may with certainty be attributed to Mary. This vellum psalter, with occasional illuminated capitals and decorative borders, was written apparently by one fifteenth-century professional scribe throughout, and donated to the University by a graduate student in 1636, as noted on a flyleaf.³² Apart from additions to the calendar, any corrections to the main text are often very minor, but what is most intriguing is that the hand of the final page, fol. 116r (with fol. 116v being blank), is strikingly different from that of the preceding. (Figure 5: Final leaf by Mary Nevel. Edinburgh University Library, MS 59, fol. 116r. Reproduced with the permission of Edinburgh University Library.) This latter hand, which is quite large with only twelve lines on the page and so out of keeping with the other hand where there are about twenty-six lines to a page, is particularly eye-catching because of its diamond-shaped full stops and the serifs at the bottom of letter forms, together with the usual hairline strokes. Even if there are no undecorated capitals to compare, this is clearly another instance of Mary

³⁰ See Hogg 2003, p. vii, n. 6. The other three processional are: The Archives of the Duke of Northumberland at Alnwick Castle, DNP: MS 505A; Cambridge, St John's College, MS 139, and Exeter University Library, MS 262/1, Syon Abbey medieval and early modern manuscript collection. Mary is not responsible for any part of MS 139 or MS 262/1; for MS 505a, see below.

³¹ de Hamel 1991; there is a dense network of scribal relationships among Syon manuscripts that de Hamel has otherwise partly brought to light; other scribal connections are raised in Miles 2010. I do not discuss these, but intend to so in my research on scribal literacy at Syon.

³² Described in Borland 1916, pp. 106–107.

Nevel's hand (see Figure 5). This example was first brought to light by Alexandra Barratt as she noticed the similarity between this folio and pp. 220**–231 in the Cambridge processional above, but not their association with Mary Nevel.³³ The insertion of a final folio to compensate for one that had got lost at the end of a quire (the catchword 'iudicare' is found on fol. 115v) would support de Hamel's thesis that it was Mary's job as chantress to repair manuscripts that had missing text.

Thirdly, in this liturgical group there are two bifolia from a Birgittine breviary in Exeter University Library, MS 262/Fragments 5 and 7, Syon Abbey medieval and early modern collection or, better still, Fragments 4a and 4b, as designated by Ker and Piper.³⁴ (Figure 6: Possibly or possibly not Mary Nevel's hand. Exeter University Library, MS 262/Fragment 7, Syon Abbey medieval and early modern collection. Courtesy of the University of Exeter. Special Collections). Fragment 5 or 4a comprises sections of readings for Monday Matins and Lauds, and of Tuesday Matins first lesson; fragment 7 or 4b consists of parts of Friday Matins third lesson and of Saturday Matins first lesson.³⁵ The centre-fold of fragment 5 or 4a is blurred and difficult to read and in fragment 7 or 4b lines at the top are missing and the outer end of each line has gone; originally there would have been nineteen lines per page (see Figure 6). The Latin is pointed in red for correct stress when reading aloud. The hand is a large *textus quadratus* and looks remarkably like the previous examples of Mary Nevel's hand, with its large letters. There are very few upper case letters for comparison, though there is a 'T' in 'Tercia' (recto of the centre-fold) that has the zig-zag pattern seen in the Syon Martyrology capitals. The tell-tale serifs at the baseline are there, albeit not as prominent as in other instances which gives pause for thought. Overall this *may* or *may not* be another example of Mary's hand.

Fourthly, in this liturgical group is the final unfoliated double spread in the The Archives of the Duke of Northumberland at Alnwick Castle, DNP: MS 505 (a processional). These two folios contain on the verso antiphons for evensong and matins, finishing with a prayer to St Katarina, and on the recto the prayer, 'O *omnipotens sempiternus deus*'. The same perplexity obtains here as with the Exeter fragments. While the hand or hands, particularly that of the prayer, bears a remarkable similarity to Mary's, on closer inspection there is some dissimilarity in the overall appearance and again in the restrained use of serifs at the baseline

³³ Barratt 2009, p. 119.

³⁴ As catalogued in the Syon Abbey collection in Exeter University Library, these fragments are separated as fragments 5 and 7; in the clear analysis of all the fragments in Ker & Piper 1992, pp. 348–349 (p. 349), they are fragments 4a and 4b, which is a much better description.

³⁵ These are fully identified and described in Ker & Piper 1992, p. 349.

to warrant some caution. On balance, this hand has more in common with the Exeter one and so *may* be the same hand as that; one way or another, the same caveats apply in that the Alnwick hand *may* or *may not* be by Mary Nevel.

Finally, in the third category overall there are two part-vernacular examples, starting with a single paper leaf from London, British Library, MS Harley 494: folio 4*r (the asterisk indicates a duplicated folio) that contains a Latin prayer to Onuphrius, a saint known in Syon circles. Alexandra Barratt says that the hand here ‘is either the same as that found in London, Lambeth Palace, MS 3600, and the additions to Cambridge, University Library, MS Additional 8885 or it is modelled on that hand’.³⁶ The rest of this manuscript is a lengthy compilation of prayers and devotional material in English and Latin associated with a woman or women named Anne Bulkley whose name occurs in the manuscript. Barratt argues that this woman was a Hampshire widow, and that the manuscript was perhaps later owned by her daughter of the same name, who was a nun at Amesbury (Wiltshire), though Barratt also postulates links with Syon.³⁷ Yet the trouble is that, although Barratt is quite right in attributing much of the manuscript to the hand of Robert Tailour, the steward of Syon who also wrote *The Myoure of oure Ladye* for the Birgittine nuns, the hand on fol. 4*r bears no relation whatsoever to that encountered in the Cambridge and Lambeth manuscripts which we now know may be identified with that of Mary Nevel. Therefore, we have not gained a seventh example of Mary’s hand but fortunately the final — and most important — example is entirely certain.

All of Mary Nevel’s scribal features are also found in London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3600, whose scribal connections with the processional in Cambridge have long been known (albeit without a scribal identification).³⁸ Similarly to St John’s, MS 167 and Bodleian, MS Bodley 62, the Lambeth manuscript also has index tabs. The bulk of the manuscript (fols 9–144) is vellum, like all the other manuscripts in which Mary was involved. The paper folios have a range of different hands (some repeated) on fols 3r–5v and 145r–149r, but the vellum leaves are all written in Mary’s distinctive hand. (Figure 7a: Latin text by Mary Nevel. Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3600, fol. 67r. Reproduced with the permission of His Grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury.)

The same scribal features encountered elsewhere occur all the way through: the large letter forms (in this case fitting fourteen lines to the page); the hairline strokes; the very

³⁶ See Barratt 2009, p. 179, who transcribes and discusses the text on pp. 178–179.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 22–33.

³⁸ See n. 29.

pronounced diamond-shaped full stops; the plain large initials usually found in her work (with the obvious exception of the decorated ones at the very start of the Lambeth text and in the Edinburgh folio, and the more embellished ones found at points in the processions); the zig-zags on the left of some capitals; the double vertical line on certain others; and the very characteristic serifs at the baseline (see Figure 7a). (Figure 7b: English text by Mary Nevel. Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3600, fol. 66v. Reproduced with the permission of His Grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury.) Most notably of all, this hand routinely makes use of the dot and the idiosyncratic loop on the y found in Mary's signature noted at the beginning and not found before because we have been dealing with Latin manuscripts; for instance, fols 9r, 20r, and 24r have particularly good examples of 'y' with its teardrop curl and diamond-shaped dot on top, as does fol. 66v, for instance, in 'de/uocyon' in the last line (see Figure 7b). For the first time the text here is extensive enough to find comparisons with her script elsewhere, including her signature. We see that she uses the plainer capital found elsewhere as well as the zig-zag type, if we compare the plain 'T' in 'Take' on fol. 58v with the more elaborate 'T' in 'Tercia' in the Exeter fragment above. On folio 140r 'marie' is a good point of comparison with 'mare' on the flyleaf of St John's, MS 167; while fols 9r and 38v have a capital 'N' that is identical to Mary's 'N' in her signature.

There are other features too that confirm the identification of Mary as scribe — and a good one at that. Unlike those in Bodleian, MS Bodley 62, the prayers here are suited to a female user, for example, 'ego indigna peccatrix' (fol. 70v). One other remarkable feature is that the scribe does not always bother to finish prayer endings, but is content with an abbreviated format: for instance, 'Qui v. e. r. d. p. o. s. s.' (fol. 43r) — clearly the work of someone used to copying 'Qui viuis et regnas deus per omnia secula seculorum'. Fols 61v, 62r, and 62v have extensive annotation in the form of added prayers (in a later sixteenth-century cursive hand). Apart from this, there is only a very rare trace of correction, for example, on fol. 21v where 'syngē' is crossed through very lightly and 'sygne' written in a cursive hand in the margin and fol. 66v (see Figure 7b) where 'and' is added in a secretary hand. It is not clear whether these are 'official' correcting hands or those by later owners.

As far as I am aware, Lambeth, MS 3600 is the only known example not only in Syon circles but in the whole of late Middle English (if viewed broadly) of a complete manuscript written by a nun.³⁹ It is an extensive collection of devotional Latin and English material

³⁹ It is argued that there was some secular female involvement in the production of the much discussed Findern Anthology (Cambridge University Library, MS Ff. 1. 6), on which there is an extensive literature, but nothing that compares to the Lambeth example.

(some of which is repeated in both languages) from the sixteenth century, that bears some similarity to the contents of Lambeth, MS 546, part of which was written by the Syon ‘scrybeler’ alluded to earlier.⁴⁰ If Mary is responsible for almost 140 devotional items in Lambeth, MS 3600 — as all the evidence suggests that she is — she is not only capable of writing a whole volume consistently and elegantly, but she is also — apparently — able to engage in some composition, as several of the items are unique (to the extent that devotional material can ever be truly unique). Albeit that it does not necessarily follow that the scribe of an only copy is *ipso facto* its author, the evidence here seems compelling. If this is the case, then de Hamel’s understandable argument that no Syon nuns were responsible for whole books needs to be re-assessed and Barratt’s speculation that the manuscript may have been written by a nun confirmed.⁴¹

If we accept that the signature in St John’s, MS 167 is by Mary Nevel — and there is no reason why we should not do so — then on palaeographical grounds we may attribute elements of between five and seven manuscripts to her: later parts of St John’s, MS 167; the book marks in British Library, MS Additional 22285; the last section of Cambridge, MS Additional 8885, the last page of Edinburgh, MS 59; *possibly* or *possibly not* the fragments in Exeter University Library, MS 262; and the last opening of Alnwick, MS 505A; and — most significantly and certainly — virtually the whole of Lambeth, MS 3600. And if she is not responsible for parts of Bodleian, MS Bodley 62, and possibly not for the Exeter fragments and the Alnwick folios, there is another scribe/s who writes very like her. Perhaps this is someone who wrote alongside Mary, trained Mary or was trained by Mary. If this were the case, it would open up all sorts of interesting possibilities about in-house training on the lines of what happened in Vadstena under Christina Hansdotter Brask.⁴²

With this point we return again to the continent. In his article on Syon’s first scribe, Anna Karlsdotter, Gejrot’s discussion in part involves a consideration of where Anna wrote the book, England or Sweden, and where it might have been decorated. In the end he opts for England on the strength of the illumination that may be associated with the workshop of Hermann Scheere. In other words, he concludes that Anna may have written out the Swedish prayers from memory while she was at Syon and had the book decorated by an illuminator

⁴⁰ The English prose contents of Lambeth, MSS 546 and 3600 are described in Pickering & O’Mara 1999, pp. 49–51 and 70–72; a list of the contents of Lambeth, MS 3600 is in Barratt 2009, pp. 127–131.

⁴¹ Barratt 2009, pp. 119 and 126.

⁴² See Hedlund 2003.

based in London rather than having produced the manuscript in Sweden and sending to England to be decorated.⁴³ Conversely, there may be a suggestion of continental involvement that will form the next leg of the journey with Mary Nevel, Syon's last female scribe.

Among many other issues in this palaeographical conundrum it is not clear when Mary might have written the various parts of the manuscripts discussed here, and so any theories about precedence can only be speculative. It is in the nature of highly formalized *textualis* scripts that they are very difficult to date. While commentators have put forward various dates for the processions associated with Syon, the only real clues are their inclusion of a copy of a dispensation by John Kemp, Bishop of London, '*bone memorie*' (he died in 1454), and the presence of Saint Osmund (canonized in 1457) in the original litany.⁴⁴ Any updating can only indicate the chronology of events and not the exact dating of respective items. Given that Mary was not professed until 1535, her work cannot precede this date. This has important consequences for the overall dating of the processions; if, according to de Hamel, four of the processions were written between 1480 (with the Cambridge manuscript perhaps being a decade earlier) and 1500, some of them have been added to considerably later.⁴⁵ An early inscription (fol. 6v) recording the birth of 'Elynor Mownselowe' on 28 December 1543 in the Edinburgh manuscript testifies to its having left Syon fairly soon after the Dissolution of the Monasteries. This demonstrates that the manuscript had come into secular possession four years after the Dissolution or, less likely, that it was the creation of some unnamed Birgittine nun. One way or another, it proves that Mary Nevel wrote the final folio before 1543. In addition, because she was one of the Syon nuns who went abroad post-1539, it may be that the bulk of her work dates from this period. It is striking that the cover of Lambeth, MS 3600, is dated probably to Louvain or Leuven in about 1550.⁴⁶ As we have seen, from October 1552 to the return of the nuns in 1557 Mary Nevel was in the Birgittine convent of Maria Troon at Dendermonde, which is just less than sixty kilometres from Leuven. As shown by Ulla Sander Olsen, this convent was renowned for manuscript production from the days of the abbess Marie van Oss.⁴⁷ It may not be too far-fetched to speculate that Mary — if she did not bring this manuscript with her — made use of her time in Dendermonde by

⁴³ Gejrot 1994, pp. 36, 44 and 53–54, note 48.

⁴⁴ See de Hamel 1991, pp. 85 and 142.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 82 and 85. One motivator for this scribal activity might have been the abbess, Constance Brown, consecrated in 1518. From the Syon accounts sizeable amounts of paper and parchment — far beyond the average — were purchased in 1518/19, which would have implied a sizeable number of books; see Erler 1985, pp. 300–301.

⁴⁶ Ker 1977, p. 199.

⁴⁷ Sander Olsen 1989–90 and 1997.

copying down Latin prayers (some of which would seem to come from early printed sources), as well as providing the English equivalent for some of them. This might be further supported by the fact that some of the material in Lambeth, MS 3600 derives from continental sources (Dutch and German), although it could equally indicate long-standing textual connections between Syon and the Low Countries.

Depending on how the material here is dated (either closer to Mary's profession in 1535 or her death in 1557/8), there are different scenarios for the scribal activity above. That Mary Nevel had acted as Syon's resident chantress and so corrected and produced various volumes in the pre-Dissolution period, some of which she then took abroad. Or her writing career began in exile for reasons of necessity (influenced perhaps by an active scriptorium in Dendermonde, something that she would not have witnessed at home as there was no Syon scriptorium). It is interesting that in 1571 when Katherine Palmer (then located in Mishagen) wanted a copyist for the *Directorium aureum contemplativorum* with the *Tractatulus de effusione cordis* of Hendrik Herp (d. 1478), she asked an English secular priest, Edmund Hargat.⁴⁸ Perhaps after Mary's death there were no other Syon sisters capable of the task.

Yet maybe a combination of the two scenarios makes more sense: that Mary started her writing career, possibly as Syon's chantress, in the third decade of the sixteenth century in England and carried it on until the middle of the century in the Low Countries. We have already seen that at least one of her manuscripts, Edinburgh, MS 59, cannot have been taken abroad as it was dispersed from Syon at least by 1543.⁴⁹ This alone would suggest that Mary had to have been writing before her sojourn on the continent. It is not easy to answer when — or where — the other volumes were produced or taken later. There are no obvious changes in writing style or diminution of expertise that would enable one manuscript to be dated before or after another purely on palaeographical grounds. Nevertheless, common sense would dictate that the nuns would not have left Syon without the books that they would have used daily, meaning that Mary's additions to the processionals (Cambridge, MS Additional 8885 and St John's, MS 167) may date from the pre-1539 period; it may not be insignificant that the cover used in the St John's manuscript is of a type used by a London binder between 1535 and 1549.⁵⁰ It might be assumed that Mary's updating of these manuscripts also springs from this time; this rationale would also apply to the Alnwick manuscript, if the script is hers. This

⁴⁸ See Rhodes 1993, p. 164, note 28, and Erler 2013, p. 112.

⁴⁹ As noted, Bodleian, MS Bodley 62, albeit not in Mary's hand, was also in non-Birgittine ownership by 1597.

⁵⁰ See Hanna 2002, p. 234.

may be further reinforced by the fact that Mary's addition to the Cambridge manuscript is for the Feast of the Holy Name, an object of devotion since the early days of Syon, but only legitimated as a regular feast in the late 1480s, making it more likely that she made this addition before they left Syon rather than afterwards.⁵¹ Conversely, given the Leuven/Louvain binding of Lambeth, MS 3600, it is tempting to suggest that this volume at least was one that may well have been produced in Dendermonde.⁵² Far from her country as Anna Karlsdotter had been at the foundation of the Order, writing down English prayers and devotions would have enabled Mary Nevel in her exile to remain in contact with home while at the same time showing herself to be a continuing part of European female scribal tradition — something that few other English nuns could claim.⁵³

⁵¹ For information on the cult of the Holy Name and Syon see Powell 2007, pp. xxi, xl–xliv.

⁵² Whether such a hypothesis is viable depends on further scrutiny and on the potential identification and dating of the minor hands at the beginning and end of the manuscript.

⁵³ I hope to pursue Mary Nevel's potential continental links in my future study of her manuscripts, particularly Lambeth, MS 3600, and Syon scribes. I am very grateful to the custodians of the libraries above for granting me access to their holdings, to the relevant authorities for permission to reproduce the materials here; I am particularly grateful to the following archivists and librarians: Christopher Hunwick of the Duke of Northumberland's Estates; Kathryn McKee, St John's College Library, Cambridge; Angela Mandrioli and Sue Inskip, Exeter University Library; Stewart Tiley, St John's College Library, Oxford; and to the staff of the Institute of Historical Research, London. For very helpful discussions on palaeographical matters, my thanks are due to Eddie Jones, William Marx, Oliver Pickering, Susan Powell, Kari Anne Rand, Patricia Stoop, and Daniel Wakelin. Above all, I should like to thank Christopher de Hamel and the late Neil Ker whose earlier work on these manuscripts has been invaluable.

Manuscripts and Incunabula

The Archives of the Duke of Northumberland at Alnwick Castle, DNP: MS 505A
Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 8885
Cambridge University Library, MS Ff. 1. 6
Cambridge, St John's College, MS 139
Edinburgh University Library, MS 59
Exeter University Library, MS 262/1, Syon Abbey medieval and early modern manuscript collection
Exeter University Library, MS 262/ Fragments 5 and 7, Syon Abbey medieval and early modern manuscript collection
Göttingen University Library, 4^o Theol. Mor. 138/53 Inc.
London, British Library, MS Additional 22285
London, British Library, MS Harley 494
London, Metropolitan Archives, MS 9531/9
London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 546
London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3600
London, The National Archives, Prob. 11/31/52
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