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A NORFOLK GENTLEWOMAN AND LYDGATIAN PATRONAGE: LADY SIBYLLE BOYS AND HER CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT¹

The poetry of John Lydgate (c.1370–1449/50) is often discussed in terms of the poet's illustrious and powerful patrons: literary commissions for royal figures such as Henry V (*Troy Book*), Henry VI (numerous mummings and pageant poems), and Charles VI (*A Devowte Invocacion to St Denys*) demonstrate the dynamic and significant interface of fifteenth-century poetry and politics.² The recent renaissance of Lydgate scholarship (in particular that inaugurated by Paul Strohm and Lee Patterson and now significantly augmented by Robert Meyer-Lee, Nigel Mortimer, and Maura Nolan) and historical enquiry into late medieval cultural politics (by Christine Carpenter, Richard Firth Green, and John Watts) has shown that life was, in Nolan's terms, 'inescapably political, that politics govern[ed] all vectors of daily practice'.³ My concern in this essay is to interrogate, and perhaps to extend, this assessment to the literary patronage of a fifteenth-century Norfolk gentlewoman, Lady Sibylle Boys (c.1370–c.1456). Sibylle Boys has traditionally been identified as the patroness of two of Lydgate's shorter poems, 'Epistle to Sibille' and 'Tretise for lauandres'; both the poems and their putative patron have been dubbed 'minor' and 'marginal'. Henry Noble MacCracken included both poems in his volumes of Lydgate's 'minor' poems, Derek Pearsall charges with 'quaint antiquarianism' those who view poems like the 'Tretise' as anything more than simple commissions, and most recently Robert Meyer-Lee has described Sibylle Boys as a member of 'marginal gentry' and the poems associated with her as 'purely didactic and mundane'.⁴ This essay aims to reconstruct the cultural life of Sibylle Boys and in so doing enable a new, and nuanced, evaluation of this kind of culture. Sibylle Boys – female, 'provincial', gentry – and the poems associated with her – 'mundane' curiosities – should not, I contend, be seen as a minor figure but rather one whose cultural life was 'mainstream', prestigious, and shows the full valence and manipulation of Chaucerian and Lydgatian authorities. Hence my title employs the term 'environment' to connote a commissioned text's status as both 'cause' and 'symptom' of – or artefact in conversation with – its contexts; these contexts can include literary, political, social, financial, and personal spheres. A text's 'environment' can encompass a wide range of practices, of association, kinship, and patronage; it also encompasses formal, informal, and semi-formal engagements with images, texts, intertexts, and books, and responds to concerns of class, genre, gender, politics, affinity, and wealth.⁵ By using a

capacious understanding of environment I hope to delineate the factors both at work on and exploited by Sibylle Boys as patroness and by John Lydgate as patronized poet.

First, it is necessary briefly to sketch Boys's biography. Sibylle Boys was the daughter and heiress of Sir Robert Illey (d. before 1398), knight, and Lady Catherine Illey (d. 1417) of Plumstead Parva (Norfolk).⁶ She was apparently born around 1370, making her close in age to Lydgate himself; she is described in a papal letter of 1451 as being about 80 years old.⁷ She married Sir Roger Boys (d. c.1422) of Honing and Ingham (Norfolk), with whom she had two children, Thomas (d. 1432) and Robert (d. 1450).⁸ Sibylle Boys's husband was a member of the ultra-prestigious and influential Guild of St George at Norwich, which included the leading families of Norfolk and some key players in the world of Lancastrian politics.⁹ Both of the Boyses' children predeceased their mother. Thomas left to his mother all his silver, the furniture of his Norfolk chapel, and a horse called Powys.¹⁰ Robert Boys rose to a position of considerable prominence and power by the 1440s; he left a widow, Jane, and a daughter, Katherine.¹¹

Boys was running the estates of her late husband soon after his death, certainly by 1424, and did not remarry.¹² By the 1450s Boys was a woman of wealth and property; she appears to have indentured her manor and the advowsons of two churches at Holme Hale in 1451/2 to Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, in return for which an obit would be said yearly for her. However, Holme Hale was sold and Boys died, at some point after 1455/6, before this could take effect.¹³ The 1451 papal letter refers to 'a certain hindrance and old age' which prevented Boys from visiting Rome on pilgrimage, probably referring to the chaos in Norfolk following Jack Cade's rebellion.¹⁴

Sibylle Boys's main claim to fame has, to date, been her appearance in the 'scribbling papers' of the Norfolk justice and correspondent William Paston I (1378–1444); about 1430, Boys gave to Paston a recipe for a 'faire holsom drynk of ale'.¹⁵ The Pastons mention Sibylle Boys two further times, in both cases giving us useful information.

Margaret Paston wrote to her husband John Paston I of a striking incident in the turbulent summer of 1451, around the time that Boys was unable to visit Rome due to 'a certain hindrance':

Als for tydyngys, we have none gode in þis cuntré; I pray God send us gode. Itt was told me that Rychard Sowthwell hath enterid in þe manere of Hale, þe whiche is þe Lady Boysys, and kepyth itt wyth strength wyth seche anothere felashep as hath be att Brayston, and wastyth and dispoylyth all þat þer is. And þe Lady Boys, as itt is told me, is to London to compleyn to þe Kyng and to þe lordys there-of.¹⁶

Clearly Boys was living alone at this point and she had both considerable wealth and access to the court, as well as confidence and an independence of spirit. Southwell, who had been married to Boys's husband's aunt, had taken Holme Hale in recompense for losing the hand of Jane (née Wichingham), widow of Boys's son Robert.¹⁷ Jane was kidnapped and allegedly raped by Robert Langstrother and engaged (and later married) to him, causing Southwell to lose

the fortune into which he had planned to marry.¹⁸ This disorder was not just a familial crisis but was symptomatic of the state of East Anglia in the aftermath of Jack Cade's rebellion of 1450 and the death of the Duke of Suffolk in the same year, with the chaos instigated by Thomas Daniel and the Duke of Norfolk's affinity (which included Southwell).¹⁹ Margaret Paston's letter shows Boys to be vulnerable but assertive too; that Boys was something of an operator is confirmed in a letter of 1452 in which Agnes Paston writes to John Paston I that 'Lady Boys will selle a place called Halys' (that is Holme Hale).²⁰ Agnes Paston goes on to say that Boys 'speketh it prevyly and seith it is not tayled'²¹ as John Dam [a Paston associate and confidant] knoweth will, she hath seide as largely of oper thyng þat hath not be so'.²² Boys seems then to have been known to the Pastons as a shrewd and imaginative, and not entirely honest, woman: 'she hath seide as largely of oper thyng þat hath not be so'. It is possible that she was, at some point, involved in funding ale brewing, an occupation suggested by William Paston's recipe-note and by a financial foray by Boys into brewing in the 1440s.²³ Sibylle Boys is also found, in legal documents, being accused of forging a will.²⁴ Boys's wealth was almost certainly partly responsible for the rebuilding of the church of St Andrew at Holme Hale (1431 × 1462) and possibly for the fifteenth-century benches there, beautifully carved with figures and animals.²⁵ The Trinitarian priory at Ingham (Norfolk), whence the Boys family hailed and where they were buried, was also significantly rebuilt in the fifteenth century, probably by the Stapleton family or possibly with Boys's wealth;²⁶ the fifteenth-century rebuilding at Ingham included a splendid tomb to Roger Boys's grandparents Roger and Margaret Boys (both d. c.1380), in bold polychromy with distinctive weepers who seem to be holding books.²⁷ The Boys family made donations of land in the fifteenth century to local communities of female religious, to the Poor Clares at Brusyarde (Suffolk) and the Austin Nuns at Campsey Ash (Suffolk).²⁸ Sibylle Boys was apparently buried at Ingham, next to her husband; an eighteenth-century rubbing by Craven Ord of the now-vanished brass shows Roger Boys dressed in armour and spurs, with his dog named 'Jakke' at his feet; Sibylle Boys stands, 130 cm tall, her hands clasped in prayer, with an adoring small dog at her left foot. She has a plunging décolletage, an elegant cloak, an ornate head-dress, and a firm gaze.²⁹

Boys is imaginatively evoked by Colin Richmond in his penetrating study of the Paston family; in Richmond's account the difficulties of 'reading' Sibylle Boys vividly represent the uncertainties and elisions faced by the historian of fifteenth-century England:

If Sibyl was a liar in small things as well as great, perhaps the advice about the ale was not helpful. Again: in the dark, how does the historian throw any real light? Ignorance cannot be expressed, or, if it is (in fact, do historians do anything else?), it is ignorantly expressed. We are like the children of St Paul looking through a glass darkly all our lives, and condemned, like Falstaff at the end of his, to fumble with the sheets and babble.³⁰

Discussing the funeral brass at Ingham, Richmond asks, not entirely facetiously,

'If Jakke was Sibyl's dog, might that not reveal more about her than anything else not only does now, but did then?'³¹ In other words, might not cultural patronage and everyday *habitus* (Pierre Bourdieu's term for the individual's absorption and reiteration of cultural criteria and modes) tell us a great deal more about how a person interacted with their world than 'factual' records of marriage, childbirth, finance, and estates? Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* is helpful here, for it offers a way of understanding the structuring of the individual's interaction with culture.³² Bourdieu examines the large range of notions of 'legitimate', elegant, or intellectual culture and notes the pretensions, misunderstandings, and ambitions involved in the consumption of cultural forms. In an amusing discussion of 'aesthetic disposition' Bourdieu found that the more educated the respondent, and the higher the social class, the more likely they were to find a cabbage 'interesting' or 'beautiful'.³³ Thus Bourdieu develops his theory of an 'acquired [cultural] capital' in which a combination of aspiration, affectation, and inherited status eclipses actual expertise or knowledge. Bourdieu's work has been useful in the present study for thinking about how something mundane and familiar and apparently inexpressive – domestic duties and laundry – could be valued, important, subject to interpretation, and rendered into cultural artefacts such as poetry. Cultural patronage can show us, in a manner akin to now-familiar ideas of 'self-fashioning', not only how Sibylle Boys wanted to be seen, and how she interacted with fashions, institutions, and cultural authorities, but how these authorities acted on her. As Richmond suggests, the details of everyday life – like Sibylle Boys's pets – might reveal as much as, or more than, her being received at court.

Sibylle Boys has been identified as patroness of two of Lydgate's poems. MacCracken suggested that Sibylle Boys was the dedicatee of Lydgate's 'Epistle to Sibille', an identification which is not watertight but is probably correct and is certainly plausible.³⁴ MacCracken also suggested that 'Lady Sibille Boys, or some other Suffolk [sic] dame' was probably the patron of the 'Tretise for lauandres', a short aphoristic poem on having one's clothing cleaned;³⁵ this attribution is entirely speculative. Pearsall concurs with MacCracken, noting that Boys 'fits wells Lydgate's picture of a worthy and busy matron'.³⁶ Whilst these are by no means secure identifications, the acceptance of the plausibility of Sibylle Boys as patron can tell us a great deal about what was precious, familiar, and prestigious to a woman, and a reader, of Sibylle Boys's station. Moreover, using Boys as a lens through which to view Lydgatian poetry helps us reconsider key issues of class, piety, and merit.

Lydgate's 'Epistle to Sibille'

Lydgate's 'Epistle to Sibille' has been connected with Sibylle Boys purely on the basis of the reference to 'my ladye which cleped is Cybille' in its envoy, corroborated by a rubric by John Shirley referring to 'Sibille'.³⁷ The forename is a relatively unusual one and the identification of Sibylle Boys as patroness is sound, given her connection to others – William de la Pole (Earl, then Duke, of

Suffolk), the Pastons, Fastolf, the Stapletons – involved in Lydgatian patronage and similar East Anglian vernacular culture (connections explored in further detail below). The poem probably dates from after 1422, the date of the death of Sir Roger Boys, for it implicitly addresses ‘Cybille’ as a single woman and refers to husbands in the past tense (‘hir housbande prudently toke hede / And preyed hir amonege hir folkes alle ...’, lines 101f.). The poem also carefully encompasses ‘mayde, widowe, or wyffe’ (lines 22, 127), the three female estates. MacCracken included the poem in his volume of Lydgate’s minor ‘religious works’, on account of the poem being a paraphrase of Proverbs xxxi.10–31, the description of the ideal housewife or *mulier fortis*. The ‘Epistle to Sibille’ is, assuredly, pious, but MacCracken’s placing of the poem in a devotional arena overlooks the more secular, indeed social, work being performed by the text and in its commissioning.

The ‘Epistle’ survives in one manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 59, fols 59^v–62^r.³⁸ This book is John Shirley’s compilation of Chauceriana and Lydgatiana. As a witness, Shirley’s attribution to Lydgate – and the ascription of patronage to ‘Cibille’ (fol. 59^v) – can be seen as fairly reliable, given Shirley’s familiarity with Lydgate’s poetry and with Lydgatian literary culture.³⁹ Otherwise, there is little to be gleaned from the poem’s manuscript context: in her examination of this book’s organization, Margaret Connolly has identified only broad trends.⁴⁰ The ‘Epistle’ may (tenuously) make a suitable counterpart, through Boys, to its neighbour (fol. 59^v) on the same folio and in the same hand, a ‘Garter list’ referring to the visit and ennoblement of the Emperor Sigismund in 1416.⁴¹ This text is a list of the Garter knights present at the visit, several of them members of the Boys’ Norfolk social group, including Sir Thomas Erpingham (c.1355–1428) and Sir Simon ffelbrigge (1368–1442; admitted to the Garter by Henry V), who feature in the ‘Garter list’. Moreover, Sir John Fastolf (who was admitted to the Order of the Garter, after Sigismund’s visit, in the 1420s, and was a friend and business partner of the Boys family) owned a similar text.⁴² Amongst founding Knights of the Garter was Sir Miles Stapleton (1320?–1364) of Ingham, ancestor of Boys’s kinsmen and founder of the Trinitarian priory where Boys herself would be buried. It is thus plausible that the ‘Garter list’ and the ‘Epistle to Sibille’ reached Shirley from a manuscript connected with Boys.

The choice of biblical source-text of the ‘Epistle’, the so-called ‘Golden ABC’ of the ideal wife or *mulier fortis* (Proverbs xxxi.10–31), is in itself revealing.⁴³ The portrait of the perfect wife presented in Proverbs is temporal; it does not mention religion but rather emphasizes the industriousness and sagacity of the wife as manager of the household. Moreover, the husband plays little role in this household, other than in offering enthusiastic praise and approval; this is a vision of domestic administration in which the wife takes a full part in ‘virtuous besinesse’ (line 56). The passage from Proverbs presents the household as a little factory, as well as a place of comfort and female authority: Sibylle Boys, a wealthy and competent wife and then widow, thus makes a fitting dedicatee for such a text.

Lydgate's poem takes 'besinesse' as its refrain and its theme, celebrating the wife as provider of 'worldely plentee fulsum habondance' (line 33). Extrapolating fairly freely from the biblical text, the 'Epistle' goes on to celebrate a range of decidedly worldly, rather than spiritual, facets of its addressee's domestic realm: her provision for 'hir servantz' (line 41), her resemblance to 'a shippe of marchandyse' (line 43, quoting Proverbs xxxi.14) with her house full 'of stiffe' (line 46), her abilities 'in truwe pourchace' (line 47), her generous provision of alms (line 64, citing Proverbs xxxi.20) and virtuous teaching of her servants, her fine clothing 'of fyne pourpur' (line 72) and 'ryche cloþe' (line 78), her prudent management of 'her childre' (line 100) and 'hir housbande' (line 101), and, finally, in Lydgate's envoy, her disposition to 'labour, avoydyng ydelnesse, / Vsinge hir handes in vertuous besynesse' (lines 139f.). In celebrating the admirable pious wifehood practised by 'Sibille', the 'Epistle' also congratulates her on her wealth, her power, her authority, and her material success. In this way and whilst based on a biblical model, the 'Epistle' can be seen as a distinctly materialistic, even capitalist, work of culture. The 'Epistle' is then, in part, an expression of religious virtue rendered into a kind of household and terrestrial authority particularly fitting for its patron and suited to those elements of 'pray and display' which so characterize fifteenth-century culture.

Lydgate's 'Epistle' also partakes of a secular allusive register as it is shot through with Chaucerianisms, many of them culled directly from the idealized portrait of Griselda given by the Clerk in *The Canterbury Tales*: Griselda's 'glad visage' (IV.949) is repeated in Sibille's 'glad visage' (line 38), the Clerk's organic 'habundance' (IV.203) becomes Lydgate's 'fulsum habondance' (line 33), the 'povre folk' of Griselda's village (IV.200; IV.204) become the 'poure folke' (line 64) to whom Sibille picturesquely gives alms, Griselda's 'heigh prudence' (IV.1183) becomes Sibille's 'hye prudence' (line 96), and so on. These allusions or borrowings show that Lydgate's flattery of Sibylle Boys was modelled on a Chaucerian, as well as a scriptural, exemplar. The exemplary and highly 'literary' (that is, Chaucerian) portrait of Griselda, sanctioned by the scriptural precedent of the *mulier fortis*, became a way for 'Sibille' to be styled at the convergence of poetry and piety, endorsed not only by biblical authority but also by Chaucer.⁴⁴ In turn, the 'Epistle' is not only a vernacular work of popular piety but a high-status Chaucerian imitation attuned to concerns of domesticity and wealth.

It is hard to believe, however, that Lydgate did not, at least in a small way, base parts of his encomium to Sibylle Boys on less flattering Chaucerian archetypes, taken from ironical representations of the *mulier fortis*. The description of the *mulier fortis* had also become a literary commonplace and was frequently employed, through irony and satire, in medieval antifeminist literature. The multivalent image of a woman at once independently capable and working for her husband profoundly informed Chaucer's ambivalent descriptions in *The Canterbury Tales* of Griselda in the Clerk's Tale, the Wife of Bath, and the wife in the Shipman's Tale.⁴⁵ Lydgate's 'secte' (line 9) of women answers the Clerk's 'secte' of the Wife of Bath (IV.1171), whilst Lydgate's repeated triptych of 'mayde, widow, or wyf' (lines 22, 127) recalls the feminine estates of 'wyf ...

mayde [and] wydwe' (III.1043f.) who comprise the queen's court in the Wife of Bath's Tale. Likewise, whilst the industrious 'clophemaking' for which Sibille is praised echoes both the Wife of Bath's 'cloth-making' in the 'General Prologue' (I.447) and weaving and spinning in the biblical paradigm (Proverbs xxxi.13, 22), clothmaking and spinning are also commonplaces of estates satire and vernacular antifeminism.⁴⁶ Similarly, the biblical description of the *mulier fortis* was used by Chaucer in the Shipman's Tale (VII.241–8) to show a compromised and cynically mercantilist view of wifehood.

The poem is thus poised in an irresolute space between eulogy and wit; this might be seen as another manifestation, albeit a homely and gentle one, of Lydgate's characteristic struggle between 'placid surface ... external entanglements and ... internal contradictions'.⁴⁷ The 'actual' Sibylle Boys rather gets lost in this allusive rhetorical babble, as she is constituted most authoritatively, perhaps most clearly, when she becomes subsumed by, and addressed as, literary archetypes both biblical and Chaucerian. That 'Sibylle' sought to be depicted as a version of Griselda and the *mulier fortis* is in itself a clear indication of the translation of an ambivalent literary paradigm into an announcement of self-recognition and worldly prestige. A key medium for such prestige in fifteenth-century England was Lydgatian poetry and vernacular book ownership.

As well as mediating biblical paraphrase and Chaucerian diction, the 'Epistle to Sibille' adapts commonplaces of counsel, wise management, and advice to princes to a specifically female audience. In this way the 'Epistle to Sibille', essentially a piece of 'wisdom literature', is much closer to better-known and 'major' 'laureate' texts than it at first appears. As Judith Ferster has argued in her study of the 'mirror for princes', or *Fürstenspiegel*, tradition in medieval England, such texts do not, and cannot, claim any newness but rather defer to pseudo-historical authoritative personae.⁴⁸ So too the 'Epistle to Sibille': the poem addresses 'Sibille' through the culturally authoritative and stable voices of Scripture and Chaucer via Lydgate in a way reminiscent of the prestigious texts of statecraft being produced by Lydgate around this time for Henry V and Henry VI. Whilst the dominant fifteenth-century mode of advice to princes, the *de casibus* tradition, illustrated the fall of princes, the 'Epistle to Sibille' is a laudatory text which affirms and celebrates its patron's control over the world. However, the 'Epistle', like *de casibus* and statecraft texts, affirms Lydgate's position as wise author and counsellor, expounding the importance of the asset of virtue (or Sibille's reiterated 'virtuous besynesse'). The epistolary form further suggests a pose of counsel; we might say that to cast oneself as a recipient of Lydgate's praise and advice – whether on clothing and domestic management or policy and statecraft – was to be advised like a prince.

'A tretise for lauandres'

Such temporal advice, counsel in this world, reaches its logical, if extreme, conclusion in several of Lydgate's poems which advise on, and celebrate, aspects of domesticity: notably 'A tretise for lauandres', 'A dietary, and a doctrine of

pestilence', 'A ballade of Jak Hare', and 'Stans puer ad mensam'.⁴⁹ The first of these poems, 'A treatise for lauandres', has become associated with Sibylle Boys, largely thanks to MacCracken's speculative attribution (see above, p. 264).⁵⁰ There is nothing either in the poem or its paratexts that mentions Boys, although I wish here to consider the 'Tretise' with the 'Epistle to Sibille' as a way of constructing a plausible and sustained cultural context for the commissioning and reading of this kind of poetry. Boys may well have been the donor of the 'Tretise', and, if not, it is very likely that a patron similar in station and cultural frame – and certainly female – was behind the poem's composition and consumption. Pearsall, in his critique of the 'quaint antiquarianism' with which it would be possible to read this poem, is right to highlight the formulaic and profoundly inexpressive nature of the poem; yet if we, as cultural historians, wish to know what Lydgate, or 'Lydgate', and vernacular poetry meant to a person like Sibylle Boys, we must take its status seriously.

A three-stanza version of the poem appears in the 'Findern' manuscript (Cambridge, University Library MS ff.1.6, fol. 141^r). Like the 'Epistle to Sibille', the 'Tretise' tropes both domestic control and luxury. The opening stanza addresses, in rhyme royal, those 'that haue to doe with my Ladis atyere' (line 2), a lady's domestic servants. It reminds these women that their 'fee[,] ... wages [and] hyre / Is duly paide' (lines 4f.), in a rather stern admonition of labour obligation and hierarchy. The poem, in the second stanza, then lists the luxury fabrics in the laundresses' care, 'lawne ... homple ... Lake / Pleasaunce, Reyns, & eke the fin Champeyn' (lines 8f.), a poetics of extravagant and continental consumerism.⁵¹ The laundresses are again admonished to take care of the fabrics belonging to their 'souerayn' (line 12), imaging the household as a kind of ruled realm. The laundresses are enjoined to 'doo thes verses techen here' (line 14) as the poem closes, aphoristically, with a Latin maxim ('Vinum lacta lava oleumque licore fabarum / Incaustum vino cetera mundat aqua'). This is translated and expanded in a final stanza about the four main cleaning agents used to 'purge' stains: milk for wine, lye for oil, wine for ink, and water for everything else.⁵² The poem thus complements other material in the 'Findern' manuscript which shows poetry-reading in a highly domestic and industrious mode: amongst romances and lyrics are domestic inventories and butchers' bills, as well as a range of largely female signatures;⁵³ the poem and its manuscript context straddle definitions of 'household' activity and the reading of poetry.

'A tretise for lauandres' mirrors 'An epistle to Sibille' and other Lydgatian advice poems in its faith in controlling oneself and one's environment, delineating a world in which mess is 'made clene' (line 20). The sentiment of the 'Tretise' is quite different from other sumptuary poetry, which tends to warn against extravagance.⁵⁴ The register of the 'Tretise' is, like the 'Epistle', not without ironic possibilities: the sentiments of praise are not far removed from the sentiments of antifeminist slander, of popular images of the laundress as a mistress or whore. George Krapp long ago noted Chaucer's translation of Dante's 'meretrice' as 'lavender' and it is well known that, in the words of Ruth Mazo Karras, '[one] occupation connected with illicit sexual activity was that of

laundress'.⁵⁵ At the other extreme, several medieval religious exempla conjoin clean clothing with godliness: one, in the widely disseminated *Alphabet of Tales*, describes a knight who knelt in mud before the passing Host and, on rising, found his clothes to be miraculously clean.⁵⁶

Clothing, and in particular aristocratic luxury clothing, was itself a signifier, a bearer of significations. Lydgate's paean to women's clothing in the 'Treatise', like an address to a book, privileges personal property and personal display as objects of veneration in and of themselves, almost regardless of content. On one level, the 'Tretise' marks its dedicatee, and later readers, as a consumer and owner of luxury goods as well as an employer and 'ruler' of domestic servants. The poem goes a little further than this, however, in responding to the same impulse as the 'Epistle to Sibille': the poem suggests the lady of the household reading with or to her domestic servants and the 'Tretise' imagines vernacular poetry as something domestic, something intimate and familiar, something relevant to the ordering, execution, and practice of everyday life.

In the other three medieval manuscripts (London, British Library, MSS Add. 34360, fol. 77^v; Harley 2251, fol. 59^v; Lansdowne 762, fol. 24^r) of 'A tretise for lauandres' only the third stanza of the poem appears; the removal of the first two stanzas, which address domestic servants, suggests that the readers of these other books did not want to read 'as' – or be addressed as – female servants. As I have discussed elsewhere, in the Harley manuscript a scribe of the final stanza of the 'Tretise' saw the poem as a logical counterpart to, indeed continuation of and deferral to, Chaucer's Prioress's Tale (itself a text concerned with 'purging' filth and exerting control) and Lydgate's 'Verses on St Anne'.⁵⁷ Like the Prioress's Tale, the 'Tretise' is written in rhyme royal, suggestive of stately elegance rather than banal domesticity and utility. In this context, the removal of dirt is metaphorical, recalling biblical 'cleanliness', such as the fuller's soap or herb ('herba fullorum' in the Vulgate) which represents the purification which will be given by the Messiah (Malachi iii.2).⁵⁸ In the Additional 34360 manuscript, John Stow's Lydgate and Chaucer anthology, the 'Tretise' appears next to the lyric 'Worldly Worship', which, in arguing against 'vayne gloriouse gladnes', is rather opposite in sentiment to the 'Tretise'.⁵⁹ The 'Findern' and the Harley manuscripts were, to an extent which is unclear, designed to appeal to a female audience, whilst the Additional manuscript both seems to valorize the authorial name of Lydgate and contains a number of works (roundels attributed to William de la Pole, Lydgate's verses to the Duke of Gloucester) connected with the arena of Lancastrian letters in which Boys herself was a player.⁶⁰ In the Lansdowne manuscript, a fifteenth-century miscellany of largely architectural and landownership notes, the third stanza of the 'Tretise' appears with 'a Rule howe a man stondyng in a playne by a steple or such another thyng of height by lokyng vpon it shall knowe the certentie of the height therof' (fol. 22^v), at once a practical, prosaic, and masculine kind of writing! Thus the fifteenth-century reception and environment of the poem was open and varied: the 'Tretise' was read by several different kinds of audience and reiterated in very different cultural places. To be sure, the poem cannot be characterized, or caricatured, as 'female',

'marginal', 'domestic', as it could also be pious, metaphorical, scientific, practical, possibly even ironic, to different scribes and readers.

Like the 'Epistle', the 'Tretise' takes the dominant form of princely or aristocratic writing – advice and counsel – and rewrites it for a non-princely cultural environment. If we, as cultural historians, wish to know what Lydgate, or 'Lydgate', and vernacular poetry meant to a person like Sibylle Boys, we must take the 'Tretise' seriously, at least as an artefact, which existed at a fundamental level of cultural engagement, if not as an eloquent lyric.⁶¹ This kind of literature too must have a context, and the fact that it survives as a 'minor' work by 'laureate' Lydgate makes it more, not less, important. How can we reconcile the 'Tretise' with the author of *Troy Book* or *The Fall of Princes*? Whilst the 'Tretise' looks like a simple mnemonic for domestic life, the Latin verse hints at a rather different, and less 'domestic', context: 'incaustum' – copyists' ink made out of plant gall and vitriol – suggests the world of the monastic scriptorium rather than the gentry laundry. In passing, it is worth noting that, even though the Benedictine Rule enjoins monks and nuns to do domestic chores, John Lydgate was unlikely to have done much of his own laundry:⁶² the abbey at Bury hired a 'lotrix', a laundress, amongst its minor servants.⁶³

'Specialle frendis':⁶⁴ Sibylle Boys, John Lydgate, and their literary 'circle'

The formulaic 'Epistle' and the mundane 'Tretise' have the look of marginal ephemera, or faintly ridiculous by-products of Lydgate's illustrious, if prolix, endeavours in poetry elsewhere. However, a useful way of considering Sibylle Boys's patronage of household poetry is to compare it to medieval sacramental Christianity in which the quotidian is suffused with ritual. The place of vernacular poetry within the domestic and everyday mirrors the omnipresent status of religious books and artefacts – the book of hours, the psalter, the rosary – which permeate all parts of lived experience. Carol M. Meale and Julia Boffey make a similar point in their discussion of medieval 'gentlewomen's reading', discussing a 1457 note by one Austin Fishmonger which places female literacy 'in the context of a programme of virtuous activities designed to occupy body and mind', such as working, praying, spinning, sewing, or mourning the death of Christ.⁶⁵ Whilst verses on cleaning one's laundry may strike us as rather humble or banal, the social world in which Sibylle Boys moved, the extent of her wealth, and the cultural network of which she was a part show that her quotidian literacy – configured around the promotion of household and the self – was not down-at-heel, devalued, or necessarily *arriviste*, but rather informed by the most prestigious habits of gentry reading and commissioning. Perhaps most importantly, Sibylle Boys's world shows her cultural patronage to be authorized or endorsed by prevalent ideas – both 'male' and 'female' and noble/gentry, East Anglian, 'Lancastrian' – of distinction which included, but were not limited to, this kind of 'literate practice' in which the domestic is aesthetic.⁶⁶ Thus a portrait of Boys emerges which shows her to be neither provincial nor 'minor',

nor even marginal, but rather involved in the most prestigious and influential cultural circles of late medieval England.

In his key study of patrons of letters in late medieval Norfolk, Samuel Moore convincingly showed how the upper echelons of Norfolk gentry played a fundamental role in literary patronage. Fifteenth-century poets could certainly be ‘princepleasers’ but, as Moore showed, royal commissions could parallel a vibrant and well-connected cultural world amongst the gentry, aristocracy, and those who aspired to these classes.⁶⁷ Moore describes the ‘spirit of emulation’ in medieval Norfolk, how in ‘a prosperous and unified country district a number of persons, closely connected by ties of acquaintance and literature, were patronizing literature at about the same time, causing books to be written and rewarding writers who composed books for their benefit’.⁶⁸

It is precisely this environment in which Sibylle Boys can be located. In particular, such patronage was connected to the works of Lydgate, celebrity monk of Bury and the best-known living poet of his day, as well as the rather similar cleric-poet figures of Osbern Bokenham (Augustinian friar-poet of Clare (Suffolk)) and John Capgrave (Augustinian prior-poet of Lynn (Norfolk)).⁶⁹ Lydgate, Bokenham, and Capgrave were sustained and enabled by patronage, and all used poetry to bridge clerical office and responsibility with secular engagement; moreover, all showed great versatility in the range of audiences for whom they wrote. Whilst Bokenham in particular has become associated with female patronage, he did in fact write his romance-inflected hagiography for families (Katherine and John Denston of Melford, John and Isabel Hunt), friars (Thomas Burgh, an Augustinian at Cambridge), and women from a variety of stations (Agatha Flegge, Elisabeth de Vere, Countess of Oxford, the Howards of Stoke by Nayland).⁷⁰ To conclude this essay, I wish to widen my lens a little, moving from my focus on Sibylle Boys to her Norfolk context and, specifically, the literary patrons with whom we know she was in contact.⁷¹

That Sibylle Boys’s cultural world focused on her household and that her social world focused on East Anglia should not be seen as provincial or limiting but rather cosmopolitan and well connected. The Norwich Guild of St George of which Boys’s husband and son were members counted amongst its such significant political and cultural agents as William de la Pole (Duke of Suffolk), ‘Johannes Fastholff, *Chivalier*’, and ‘Willemus Pastour’.⁷² The Norwich guild famously held a saint play of St George and the dragon each year bringing together the Norfolk elite – which was, at this point, also the Lancastrian elite – in a cultural and political performance of affiliation. The Norwich guild also included the Stapleton family, Sibylle Boys’s kinsman from Ingham (where Boys, her husband, and her parents-in-law were buried).⁷³ ‘Brianus de Stapiltoun, *Chivalier*’ (d. 1417) and his wife are also mentioned in the guild’s membership list.⁷⁴ Their son Sir Miles Stapleton (d. 1466; Suffolk’s cousin and the man described as ‘brother’ by Robert Boys in his will) and Lady Stapleton were the patrons for whom the polymath writer John Metham (fl. 1449) wrote *Amoryus and Cleopes* and a *Palmistry*.⁷⁵ Two of Miles Stapleton’s own books survive.⁷⁶ It is also evident that Stapleton, at least in his capacity as Norfolk and Suffolk sheriff,

knew Lydgate, for in 1440 Stapleton paid a royal allowance to him.⁷⁷ Stapleton was also close to the Pastons, although not always on good terms with them.⁷⁸ Miles Stapleton's sister Agnes (d. c.1448) also ran a highly literate household with a significant library: she owned copies of *The Prick of Conscience*, *The Chastising of God's Children*, *The Vices and Virtues*, a French volume of hagiography, and a copy of Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditationes vitae Christi*, probably in translation.⁷⁹ Agnes left these volumes to various nunneries on her death. Sir Miles was also, in 1444, Fastolf's executor, and around this point Fastolf was living at Boys's manor at Holme Hale.⁸⁰ Thus the Stapletons emerge as closely linked to Boys and were enthusiastic patrons and consumers of sober vernacular literature (both devotional and secular). Metham, writing in 1449–50, enthusiastically refers to the recently deceased Lydgate, 'Hys bokys endytyd with termys off retoryk / And half chongyd Latyne / Wyth conseytys of poetry / And crafty imagynacionys of thingys fantastyk';⁸¹ given Lydgate's recent demise, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that Metham had become a 'new Lydgate', writing to order for the very audience – gentry like the Boys and Stapleton families – who had once commissioned the Bury monk.

As with the Stapletons, we know too that the Paston family, with whom Sibylle Boys was in contact, both bought books and shared vernacular literary culture which included Chaucerian and Lydgatian works. Amongst the Paston letters and papers there is evidence of Anne Paston's ownership of a copy of Lydgate's 'Sege of Thebes' and John Paston II's ownership of 'ij Frenshe bookys', an 'Othea Pistill' and a forty-five-leaf 'de Regimine Principum'.⁸² In 1449 Margaret Paston sent to her son William 'a nomynale and a bok of sofysté' during his studies at Cambridge;⁸³ John Paston's will (c.1479) includes references to many books, including Chaucer, Cicero, a 'Dethe off Arthur', chivalric romances, 'Greene Knyght', 'boke off knyghthood', and religious pieces, and Fastolf too had 'bokes Frenshe, Latyn, and Englyssh'.⁸⁴ The Pastons evidently used the George Inn, Lombard Street, not only as lodgings but also as a centre for book-sharing in London.⁸⁵

In this context, a useful parallel to Sibylle Boys's Lydgatian poetry is Margery Brews's 1477 'Voluntyn', a verse valentine, to John Paston III, apparently aping Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* and featuring Brews's affectionate if clumsy poetry.⁸⁶ In her useful discussion of this letter, Rebecca Krug notes how the valentine appears to be intensely private, when in fact it is profoundly social and cooperative – not only informed by literary paradigms, but penned by the Paston clerk Thomas Kela and reinforced and reiterated in letters by Elizabeth Paston. Krug locates the valentine in terms of other Paston 'strategies for textualizing public affirmation'.⁸⁷ Such a strategy is also discernible in Boys's poems by Lydgate, which likewise knit literary culture with domestic imagery and an 'intimate' but highly rhetorical and socially constructed 'self'. Chaucerian paradigms, for both Margery Brews and Sibyl Boys, were profoundly authorizing, suggesting literary fashions shaping the lived lives of these gentrywomen.

In sum, Norwich was at this time the second largest city in England and a major cultural centre, and should not be considered a backwater, literary or

otherwise;⁸⁸ Boys and her family were connected to some of the major cultural and political players of Lancastrian England. Boys's patronage of Lydgate's 'Epistle' and 'Tretise' foregrounds the household and its management, which does not reflect 'minor' concerns but is consonant with Felicity Riddy's reading of late medieval courtesy texts in which 'domestic space' is imaged as controlled by women, 'public economy' by men.⁸⁹ Riddy suggests that in such texts the 'household' represents 'stability, piety, hierarchy, diligence, ambition and respectability', largely patriarchal ideals of female role-playing and submissiveness.⁹⁰ We know, however, that these were not the roles played by Sibylle Boys in her lived life – as complainant, litigant, a widow involved in commerce and in public acts of patronage, as subject of the Pastons' gossip. Of course, there was no vernacular poetic template (for women or men) which could embrace such a range of roles, but it is telling that just as the women's instructional texts discussed by Riddy took shape in friars' handbooks rather than as 'women's writing' so too Sibylle Boys's poetic patronage is mediated and authorized through Lydgate, a Benedictine monk. The multifaceted life records we have of Sibylle Boys are only very partially represented in the idealized, if multivalent, *literary* portrait presented by Lydgate.

What the 'Epistle' and 'Tretise' do affirm is the conjunction of aspiration and cultural legitimacy rendered into domestic poetry. Boys's connections with the Fastolfs, Pastons, Stapletons, and with Lydgate himself show her to be far from peripheral in both her cultural tastes and her social circle. In these poems we see Sibylle Boys's adoption of prestige culture which simultaneously individuates her and effaces her (and thus we return to Colin Richmond's anxieties about the historian's elisions). For, with the records and artefacts that remain, we cannot recover or retrieve Boys as an individual because she is most individual when she is using others' cultural forms with which to style herself. For Boys – like Margery Brews and her 'voluntyn' – *habitus* at once gave access to a prestigious register and required styling oneself as a Chaucerian character, and as a recipient of Lydgate's advice – in other words, as a vernacular fiction. We might consider too another of Lydgate's patronesses and a Paston associate, Alice Chaucer (c.1404–1475); she was, like Sibylle Boys, highly capable and independent, adept at political manoeuvring, and an able businesswoman, but with a keen sense of the fashioning of her own cultural image as revealed in her literary patronage and her magnificent tomb at Ewelme (Oxfordshire).⁹¹

To conclude, one hopes that we are now in a position to reassess poetry like the 'Epistle' and 'Tretise', integrating them into the better-known literary canon. They might not be great, affecting, or stirring works, but they demonstrate what 'poetry' meant to a well-connected reader. Such poems are largely read as 'curiosities' and this is probably partly on account of their patrons' gender; poems like the 'Epistle' and 'Tretise' are gendered works, amenable to a female audience, but it is not especially helpful to isolate Boys as a 'female reader', or to totalize her reading experience through her gender. Identity, in these kinds of poems, is not generated through individuating details, the executive potential of the individual, or the assertion of the one over the many; rather, the primary aim

of poems like the ‘Epistle’ and ‘Tretise’, even in their elaborate addresses to their patrons, is to buy into a shared idea of what is good conduct, good management, good diction and rhetoric. Boys’s patronage can be read as emphatically political, both because it apes Lydgatian (that is, ‘Lancastrian’) genres of counsel and because it connects her East Anglian world with courtly, princely, Benedictine, and vernacular cultures. Certainly, Boys – one of the only patrons of Lydgate who, until recently, did not appear in the *ODNB* – was not a ‘nobody’. We must bear in mind that Sibylle Boys used the same prestigious cultural authorities as other noble and gentry patrons of her day: of biblical paradigms structured around and understood through daily life, of virtue rendered into a celebration of materiality, of a sense of the self as mediated through vernacular poetry and its patronage, and of Chaucerian allusion and Lydgatian advice.

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NOTES

¹ The following abbreviations are used throughout this essay: *IMEV* = *Index of Middle English Verse*; *IMEP* = *Index of Middle English Prose*; *MPL* = *John Lydgate: The Minor Poems*, ed. H. N. MacCracken, 2 vols (London, 1934); *ODNB* = *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (via <http://www.oxforddnb.com/>); *PLP* = *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford, 1971); *PMLA* = Publications of the Modern Languages Association of America. References to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are given by fragment and line number; the edition referred to is *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Oxford, 1987). I am very grateful for the constructive criticisms given by anonymous readers and Corinne Saunders at *Medium Ævum*; I am grateful also to Timothy Phillips, who accompanied me on a rainy trip to Ingham. I would like to thank the participants who commented on this work at the Birkbeck Medieval Seminar in March 2007 on the topic of ‘Doggerel: disesteemed verse of the Middle Ages’, in particular Julia Boffey, Isabel Davis, Clare Lees, and Nicola MacDonald. I am also very grateful to Maura Nolan for discussions about Sibylle Boys and for sharing a draft of her essay on the ‘Tretise for lauandres’ with me; this has since been published as ‘Lydgate’s worst poem’, in *Lydgate Matters*, ed. Andrea Denny-Brown and Lisa Cooper (New York, 2007), 71–87.

² See for instance the essay by Paul Strohm, ‘Hoccleve, Lydgate and the Lancastrian court’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 640–61; also Lee Patterson, ‘Making identities in fifteenth-century England: Henry V and John Lydgate’, in *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing Texts*, ed. J. N. Cox and J. Reynolds (Princeton, NJ, 1993), pp. 69–108; Robert Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (Cambridge, 2007); Nigel Mortimer, *John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes: Narrative Tragedy in its Literary and Political Contexts* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 51–90; Maura Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* (Cambridge, 2005).

³ See Nolan, *John Lydgate*, pp. 14–16, for a discussion of recent writing in this field.

⁴ Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London, 1970), p. 5; Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power*, p. 51.

⁵ On a text’s ‘environment’ see Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Late Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, NJ, 1992).

⁶ See *ODNB*, s.v. ‘Boys [née Illey], Sibylle’, for a fuller biographical account. In her will,

Lady Illey granted her goods to her daughter 'Sibilla', 'provided that she behaved herself civilly, and did not disturb her executors'; see Francis Blomefield, *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 11 vols (London, 1805–10), VII, 243; the family history is given by Blomefield (VI, 8–10).

⁷ *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. J. A. Twemlow, 6 vols (London, 1915), X, 525.

⁸ London, British Library Harley MS 1552, fol. 153^r. The will of 'Roger Boys, Ingham, miles' (1422) is Norwich, Norfolk Record Office 96 Hyrnyng; the will of 'Robert Boys, Holmhale, armiger' (1450) is Norwich, Norfolk Record Office 46 Aleyn. Sibylle Boys was made her son's executor. In 1444 Robert Boys 'gave his mother power to oversee all his lands' (see Roger Virgoe, 'The ravishment of Joan Boys', in *East Anglian Studies: Essays Presented to J. C. Barringer on his Retirement*, ed. Adam Longcroft and Richard Joby (Norwich, 1995), pp. 276–81, p. 156 n. 4). Robert Boys's death is mentioned in a 1450 letter from Sir John Fastolf: 'my cosyn Boys' died owing money to Fastolf on a farm, and 40 shillings lent by Fastolf. Fastolf clearly set about recovering these debts, proving that the money was owed to him as recorded in 'my boks of accompts ... or amongst oþyrr wrytyngs' (London, British Library Add. MS 27443, fol. 118^r).

⁹ The guild membership of 'Rogerus Boys' is recorded in *English Gilds*, ed. Toulmin Smith, EETS, os 40 (London, 1870), p. 453.

¹⁰ Blomefield, *Norfolk*, XI, 43.

¹¹ Katherine Boys married into the Jenney family, marking the end of this line of the Boys family name.

¹² Blomefield, *Norfolk*, VI, 9.

¹³ Ibid. Blomefield, *Norfolk*, VII, 77, notes the will of William Calthorp of 10 Henry VII (September 1494–August 1495) which stipulates that 'all the goods of Dame Sybill Boys should be employed towards making the choir, the presbytery, and repairing [Creak Abbey]', giving £74 to do so; Boys was, obviously, long dead by this point and had left her goods to Calthorp, like her husband a member of the Norwich Guild of St George. Calthorp and Boys were trustees together of Crudd's Hall Manor at Fransham Magna (Norfolk) and are mentioned in the last dated document showing Boys to be alive, of 34 Henry VI (i.e. September 1455–August 1456). Boys had left Holme Hale by 1453, when Edmund Blake takes Boys's place in ecclesiastical documents describing the presentation of local rectors (see G. A. Carthew, *A History of the Parishes of West and East Bradenham with Those of Necton and Holme Hale* (Norwich, 1883), p. 213); as discussed below, she seems to have sold the manor following its invasion by Richard Southwell, as mentioned by Agnes Paston, although Blomefield, *Norfolk*, VI, 9, suggests that the manor passed directly to the Jenney family via Boys's granddaughter, married to a Jenney. Sir John Fastolf bought a manor at 'Holmhale' in 1436; Holme Hale was originally two manors and it seems that Fastolf owned one manor there, the Boys family the other. Blomefield, *Norfolk*, VI, 7–14; see further Anthony Smith, 'Aspects of the career of Sir John Fastolf (1380–1459)' (unpub. D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1982).

¹⁴ *Calendar of Papal Entries*, ed. Twemlow, X, 525.

¹⁵ *PLP*, I, 14.

¹⁶ *PLP*, I, 241.

¹⁷ Jane, or 'Jone', was the daughter of Edmund Wichingham (see *PLP*, II, 82–4) and Alice (née Fastolf) and therefore well connected. In his account of Jane's rape, William Paston I says Jane 'lete people wete who dowtyre she was' and how, during the abduction, 'she kryid to her modyre' (*PLP*, I, 70). It is not clear if Alice Wichingham was still alive or if these references are to Sibylle Boys, actually Jane's mother-in-law and clearly implicated in this series of events.

¹⁸ See the spirited and detailed account given by William Paston I in a letter to Southwell, *PLP*, I, 69–71; the evidence is surveyed in Helen Castor, *Blood and Roses: The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 2004), pp. 90f.; also Virgoe, ‘The ravishment of Joan Boys’.

¹⁹ See R. A. Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority 1422–61* (London, 1981), pp. 639–41; also I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 102–30 describes the context of this disorder, including (p. 113) an account of the attack on those linked to John Fastolf, such as John Payn.

²⁰ *PLP*, I, 38.

²¹ i.e. its inheritance was not restricted to a specific class of heirs; by this point neither of Sibyl Boys’s sons had a male heir, although Robert and Jane Boys had one daughter, Katherine, who married into the Jenney family.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ John Byrd was indentured with Boys at her manor at Holme Hale ‘to burn his furnace and to brew with’; Boys was ‘to have half the strays’, i.e. the unenclosed land, and she retained the profits from the rabbits on the land (Blomefield, *Norfolk*, VI, 9). See Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300–1600* (New York, 1996), pp. 56–9, on widows and ‘not-married’ women in the late medieval English brewing industry.

²⁴ Kew, National Archives, C1/15/319, papers relating to the case of Edmund Blake v. Robert Inglose, feoffee for Robert Boys, regarding a will said to have been forged by ‘dame Sibyl Boys’. It is not clear what decision was reached. Robert Boys was Sibyl Boys’s son; Robert Inglose was a member of another local gentry family, the son of Henry Inglose who was named in 1427/8 deeds with Thomas Chaucer and William Paston. See Albert C. Baugh, ‘Kirk’s life records of Thomas Chaucer’, *PMLA*, 47 (1932), 461–515.

²⁵ See Nikolaus Pevsner and Bill Wilson, *Norfolk 2: North-West and South*, rev. edn (Harmondsworth, 1999), pp. 424f.; John Wyscard left 40s. for the rebuilding of the church in 1435 (Blomefield, *Norfolk*, VI, 13) although the rebuilding work was under way some years before this.

²⁶ See Nikolaus Pevsner and Bill Wilson, *Norfolk 1: Norwich and the North-East*, rev. edn (Harmondsworth, 1997), p. 576. Cultural life at Ingham was evidently rich, with sophisticated art, architecture, and book crafts executed for and by the priory. See David Park, ‘A lost fourteenth-century altar-piece from Ingham, Norfolk’, *Burlington Magazine*, 130 (1998), 132–6; Otto Pächt and J. J. Alexander, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 3 (Oxford, 1973), p. 70.

²⁷ The tomb is very badly defaced.

²⁸ Roberta Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva, *Religious Women of Medieval East Anglia* (Norwich, 1993), p. 60.

²⁹ See London, British Library, Add. MS 32478, items 35 and 36.

³⁰ Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 8–11 (p. 10).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11. Incidentally, from the brass-rubbing it is clear that Jakke the dog belonged to Roger, not, as suggested by Richmond, his wife.

³² Bourdieu's ideas on *habitus*, rehearsed throughout his work, are distilled in his *Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge, 1996), see especially pp. 20–6.

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London, 1989), p. 37.

³⁴ *MPL*, I, xx.

³⁵ *MPL*, I, xix. Walter Schirmer likewise accepts the attribution as genuine and, also likewise, mistakes Boys for a Suffolk, rather than Norfolk, gentlewoman: “[The “Tretise”]

was written for Lady Sibille Boys of Holm Hale, of whom nothing is known except that she lived in Suffolk [*sic*]. Lydgate also dedicated to her a religious moralistic epistle³⁶; *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the XVth Century*, trans. Ann E. Keep (Westport, Conn., 1961), pp. 110f.

³⁶ Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, p. 82 n. 52.

³⁷ The poem is printed in *MPL*, I, 14–18; it is *IMEV* 3321.

³⁸ The heading to the ‘Epistle’ is given on fol. 59^v (‘Here foloweþ an Epistel made by þe same Lidegate sende to Cibille with þeschewing of ydelnesse’), but the poem proper (‘The chief gynnyng of grace ...’) starts on fol. 60^r.

³⁹ Although, as Meyer-Lee points out, the nature of the relationship between Lydgate and Shirly remains obscure. *Poets and Power*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Margaret Connolly, *John Shirley: Book Production and the Noble Household in Fifteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 150–2.

⁴¹ *IMEP* handlist 9 [= L. M. Eldredge, *Manuscripts in the Ashmole Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford* (Woodbridge, 1992), Ashmole 59, [item 2], fol. 59^v].

⁴² See Samuel Moore, ‘Patrons of letters in Norfolk and Suffolk c.1450’, *PMLA*, 27 (1912), 188–207 (p. 196), on Fastolf’s reading, and Lisa Jefferson, ‘MS Arundel 48 and the earliest statutes of the Order of the Garter’, *English Historical Review*, 109 (1994), 356–85. Fastolf’s kinswoman Alice was the mother of Sibylle Boys’s daughter-in-law Jane (on whom see above).

⁴³ The biblical text is a Hebrew abecedarian acrostic. The abecedarian nature of the original might also have been particularly appropriate to women’s poetry, given the popularity of abecedarian poetry in later medieval popular devotion (especially Chaucer’s ‘ABC to the Virgin’) and in instructional and pedagogic literature. See Alastair Minnis, *The Shorter Poems* (Oxford, 1995), p. 463; Georgiana Donavin, ‘Alphabets and rosary beads in Chaucer’s *An ABC*’, in *Medieval Rhetoric*, ed. Scott Troyan (New York, 2004), pp. 25–39.

⁴⁴ This is consonant with Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale which itself melds biblical authority with Petrarchan and Boethian texts; to some extent, Lydgate himself seems to have seen his poetic enterprise of bringing together conventional devotion with Chaucerian poetry.

⁴⁵ See James Boren, ‘Alison of Bath and the Vulgate perfect wife’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 76 (1975), 247–56; Alfred Kellogg, ‘The evolution of the Clerk’s Tale: a study in connotation’, in *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1972), 276–329; Theresa Colletti, ‘Biblical wisdom: Chaucer’s Shipman’s Tale and the mulier fortis’, in *Chaucer and the Scriptural Tradition*, ed. D. L. Jeffrey (Ottawa, 1984), 171–82; also Carolyn P. Collette, ‘Chaucer and the French tradition revisited: Phillippe de Mézières and the good wife’, in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. J. Wogan-Browne et al. (Turnhout, 2000), 151–68.

⁴⁶ See Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue of ‘The Canterbury Tales’* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 121f.

⁴⁷ Paul Strohm’s description of the defining features of the Lancastrian text; *England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399–1422* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), p. 195.

⁴⁸ Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1996), p. 165.

⁴⁹ These are, respectively, *MPL*, II, 723, 702, 445, and 739.

⁵⁰ The poem is printed in *MPL* II, 723; it is *IMEV* 4254.

⁵¹ The fabrics described would have been expensive and, originally, had a European provenance; the diction is flashily European. ‘Lawne’, a fine linen, came from the French city of Laon; ‘lake’, a kind of cambric, from the Dutch ‘laken’; ‘pleasaunce’ was a luxury

Italian fabric from Piacenza, 'Reyns' from the French city of Rennes, and 'Champeyn' from the French province of Champagne. The origins of 'homple' are obscure.

⁵² The Latin maxim is also found, without Lydgate's verses, in Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.2.13, a miscellany compiled during the reign of Henry VII (1485–1509), including recipes, music, and instructions on tuning a lute. See Christopher Page, 'The fifteenth-century lute: new and neglected sources', *Early Music*, 9 (1981), 11–21. This suggests the 'authentic' mnemonic and perhaps practical 'use' of the maxim; it also suggests that Lydgate's poem elaborates on a Latin mnemonic already in circulation.

⁵³ See Nicola F. McDonald, 'Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, ladies at court and the female reader', *Chaucer Review*, 35 (2000), 22–42 (p. 36); Kate Harris, 'The origins and make-up of Cambridge University Library MS ff.1.6', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 8 (1983), 299–333.

⁵⁴ See for example Lydgate's own 'Horns away' (*MPL*, II, 662); also *Hou the Good Wijf Tauȝte Hir Douȝtir*, which counsels thus (lines 146–50): 'And if þi neighboris wifh hap on riche a-tire, / þerfore mocke pou ne scorne, brenne not as fier, / But þanke god of heuen for þat he hath þe ȝeuene, / And so pou schalt, my douȝtir, a good lifj lyuande.' This, with similar conduct literature, is printed in *The Babees Book*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS, os 32 (London, 1868).

⁵⁵ See G. P. Krapp, 'Chaucer's *lavender*', *Modern Language Notes*, 17 (1902), 102f., noting that the word generally appears in 'evil surroundings' (taking examples from ballads and Barbour's *Bruce*); Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Women's labours: reproduction and sex work in medieval Europe', *Journal of Women's History*, 15 (2004), 153–8, where examples are drawn from the London letter-books and Oxford and Cambridge college regulations. Also, 'six damsels, to wit, whores' in the royal household were officially recorded as 'laundresses'. See Nicholas Sellers, 'Tenurial serjeants', *American Journal of Legal History*, 14 (1970), 319–22 (p. 322).

⁵⁶ Etienne de Besançon, *An Alphabet of Tales*, ed. Mary McLeod Banks, EETS os 126, 127 (London, 1904), pp. 514–16.

⁵⁷ See Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms 1350–1500* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 93–6.

⁵⁸ Likewise, Psalm 1's 'lavabis me et super nivem dealbabor' ('thou shalt wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow').

⁵⁹ IMEV, 4228.

⁶⁰ The Findern manuscript includes the signatures of named female readers and was possibly written, in part, by female scribes. See McDonald, 'Chaucer's *Legend*', pp. 35–7. There are several manuscripts featuring the Latin verse, which illustrate forcefully that this was not a 'women's' poem: London, British Library Harley MS 3528, fol. 38^v, is a seventeenth-century alchemical compendium, which considers the milk, wine, and lye as 'scientific' agents. In London, British Library, Royal MS 17.B.47 (fol. 3^v), a fifteenth-century miscellany, the Latin maxim is attached to Lydgate's 'Dietary' and was written with a prose stain-removal recipe 'if it be so that waxe be dropped on cloth' (which seems entirely practical) and a quatrain on knowing 'þe fals from þe trewe' (moral poetry on the spiritually pure and impure). See also n. 52 above.

⁶¹ Caroline Barron, 'The education and training of girls in fifteenth-century London', in *Courts, Counties and the Capital in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. D. E. S. Dunn (New York, 1996), 139–53, usefully describes the growth of 'written vernacular culture' and 'text-based' instruction, separate from 'literacy' (as in reading).

⁶² Chapter 35 of the Rule usually says that the brothers or sisters are to take turns with the laundry: as the Caxton version says, 'they owe to make al thynges clene ... and þe clothes þat the couent hath fylded with theyr handes or fete they shall delyuer clene also

wyth al mekenes'. See *Three Middle-English Versions of the Rule of St. Benet*, ed. Ernst A. Kock, EETS, OS 120 (London, 1902), p. 130.

⁶³ See M. R. James, *On the Abbey of S. Edmund at Bury*, II: *The Church* (Cambridge, 1895), pp. 178–80.

⁶⁴ This is the term used by Osbern Bokenham to describe his patrons (in the introduction to his geography, the *Mappula Anglie*), as quoted in Samuel Moore, 'Patrons of letters in Norfolk and Suffolk c.1450 II', *PMLA*, 28 (1913), 79–105 (pp. 92f).

⁶⁵ See Carol M. Meale and Julia Boffey, 'Gentlewomen's reading', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, III: 1400–1557, ed. Lotte Hellinga and J. B. Trapp (Cambridge, 1999), 526–40 (p. 526).

⁶⁶ This is Rebecca Krug's term; see *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY, 2002), pp. 7f, for her concise theorization of the issues involved.

⁶⁷ Such is the thrust of Samuel Moore, 'Patrons of letters I' and 'Patrons of letters II'.

⁶⁸ Moore, 'Patrons of letters I', p. 188. This 'spirit of emulation' is, in part, a corrective to ideas of 'self-fashioning', as it emphasizes group poeties rather than the individual literary subject.

⁶⁹ We might add the name of John Metham to the list too, a Cambridge-educated writer who was possibly in the Stapleton household at Ingham or attached to the Trinitarian priory there.

⁷⁰ See *ODNB*, s.v. 'Bokenham'. Simon Horobin's recent discoveries show Bokenham to be a far more versatile writer, and character, than has previously been considered; see Simon Horobin, 'From the angle of obliuoun: a lost medieval manuscript discovered in Walter Scott's collection', *Times Literary Supplement* (11 November 2005), 12f.

⁷¹ My focus here is largely on vernacular reading. For a relevant comparison describing the cultural world of Lollard women see Ralph Hanna III, 'Some Norfolk women and their books, ca. 1390–1440', in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens, Ga., 1996), pp. 288–305.

⁷² The guild's membership list survives and is printed in *English Gilds*, ed. Smith, p. 453. See too Norman Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370–1532* (Toronto, 1984), pp. 78–81, for an account of the guild's 'pre-eminence' and pageantry.

⁷³ Roger Boys's will requested that he be 'buried within the door (as you enter the choir) of the priory of Ingham'. Translation from Blomefield, *Norfolk*, XI, 43.

⁷⁴ Stapleton was an executor of the 1416 will of Lady Isabel Ufford, Countess of Suffolk, who remembered Julian of Norwich with a legacy. Stapleton himself was linked to anchorites at Hampole (Yorkshire), possibly Richard Rolle or Margaret Kirkby. See Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif., 1985), pp. 213–16. The Stapleton family's town house in Norwich was in the parish of St Julian, where the famous anchoress resided (see John Metham, *Amoryus*, ed. Stephen Page, www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/page.htm). Stapleton was also connected to Bokenham's patrons, the Denstons of Long Melford, as described by Moore, 'Patrons of letters II', p. 84.

⁷⁵ Princeton, University Library, MS Garrett 141, and Oxford, All Souls College MS 81.

⁷⁶ Princeton, MS Garrett 141 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 758, Michael de Massa's *Vita Christi*. See Metham, *Amoryus*, ed. Page.

⁷⁷ Printed in Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate: A Bio-bibliography* (Victoria, 1997), p. 64.

⁷⁸ *PLP*, I, 95, 623; II, 66, 240.

⁷⁹ Warren, *Anchorites*, p. 216.

⁸⁰ Robert Boys's will (see above, n. 8) provides for a mass after Trinity for Boys's parents, 'Sibill' his wife, and two generations of Miles Stapleton, confreres in the Fraternity of Ingham.

⁸¹ Metham, *Amoryus*, ed. Page.

⁸² See e.g. *PLP*, I, 409; II, 391f.; on John Paston's books see G. A. Lester, 'Books of a fifteenth-century gentleman, Sir John Paston', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 88 (1987), 206–17.

⁸³ *PLP*, I, 234.

⁸⁴ Paston's will is published in *English Historical Documents 1327–1485*, ed. A. R. Myers (London, 1969), p. 120; on Fastolf see *PLP*, I, 109.

⁸⁵ *PLP*, I, 575. It is perhaps not coincidental that the church of St Edmund was in the same street, hinting at a specifically East Anglian resonance for this London base. Other cultural connections to the world of Sibylle Boys may include an 'Andreas Boys' who was also a member of the Norwich Guild of St George (*English Gilds*, ed. Smith, p. 457), although I have been unable to link his genealogy with Sibylle or Roger Boys. He appears to be Andrew Boys of South Elmham (Suffolk) near Bungay, mentioned in various conveyances (Lowestoft, Suffolk Record Office, HA12/B2/4/3, HA12/B2/4/13, HA12/B2/12). A further speculation is that Sibylle Boys was somehow related to David Boys (d. after 1465), Carmelite chaplain to Eleanor Cobham, Duchess of Gloucester (c.1440–1452) and possibly also to Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester; he wrote six now-lost books including *Against the Moslems* and *On True Innocence*, and his profile would connect well with this world of East Anglian letters and influence, although a firm connection cannot be established; see *ODNB*, 'Boys [Boscus], David'.

⁸⁶ *PLP*, I, 575, 662f.; Krug, *Reading Families*, pp. 39–43.

⁸⁷ Krug, *Reading Families*, p. 39.

⁸⁸ See Ruth H. Frost, 'The urban elite', in *Medieval Norwich*, ed. Carole Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson (London, 2004), 235–53, for a discussion of the cultural world of which Boys was a part.

⁸⁹ Felicity Riddy, 'Mother knows best: reading social change in a courtesy text', *Speculum*, 71 (1996), 66–86 (p. 67).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ See Carol M. Meale, 'Reading women's culture in fifteenth-century England: the case of Alice Chaucer', in *Mediaevalitas: Reading the Middle Ages*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 81–101.

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