Women and the written word : textual culture in court and convent during the twelfth-century Renaissance

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Conclusion

In the late 1970s, Joan Kelly posed a challenge to scholars of history which eventually permeated into the research fields of multiple disciplines: Did women have a Renaissance? The premise for Kelly's argument focused on the lack of recognition by scholars regarding how women's participation in historical periods should be examined as separate from that of men's, thus calling attention to a need for the contributions of women to be considered on their own. In this study, I have applied Kelly's challenge to a period known as the Twelfth-Century Renaissance, specifically investigating women's contribution to the manuscript culture of this era. The aim of the present research was to assess the reading patterns and preferences of women from a court or convent milieu during this period by looking at the books made for women, made by women, and the reading aids that guided women's reading practice contained within a cross-section of their books. In doing so, I demonstrated that twelfth-century women were active participants in this renaissance as patrons, scribes, and readers. To support this claim, the manuscript evidence I presented shows that women were engaged in the dissemination of knowledge using their noble and pious status to support the production of manuscripts that included both standard and new texts, new genres, as well as promoting works written in vernacular languages.

1. WOMEN AND THE WRITTEN WORD

In order to show the breadth of reading preferences indicated by noblewomen and nuns' participation in the manuscript culture of the twelfth century, this study has identified the main genres of books they read, how they acquired their books, and the manner in which they read them. The results of my research suggest that women in these milieus were engaged in reading books concerning history, poetry, and of course, religious texts. Interesting is their divergence, in that the new genre of romance appealed to women at court, where women in a convent setting seemed to favor sermons and homilies. Yet, taken together, these results indicate that women in both contexts actively acquired the books they wanted to read; whether by commission, exchange, or scribal pursuits. To support this claim, the material evidence I presented shows women's direct engagement with their books through donor portraits, colophons, dedications, feminized forms of Latin, or other physical features, such as decoration and paratextual marks. These instances tell us that women desired to be remembered for their contribution to book culture.

The corpus of manuscripts I have compiled further reinforces my argument that women actively contributed to the production of books during the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. My research presents over 180 extant manuscripts, combined with more than thirty books which are now lost or yet unidentified, attributed to women during the twelfth century. The numerous examples of women's books are important because they not only show the varied nature of women's reading practice, but also demonstrate the significant contribution women made to twelfth-century book culture. Further, I do not argue that my compilation is a definitive account. First, although I have attempted to be thorough, there may be manuscripts my research has missed; second, it is possible that manuscripts now labeled as "anonymous" may be assigned in the future to a female reader or female scribe; and third, this study does not include the contribution of women outside of Christianity in Western Europe during this period. However, a key strength to this dissertation is that this corpus highlights the quantity of twelfth-century manuscripts used by women in the court and convent, and allows for numerous avenues of future research to better understand their role in book history.

2. BOOKS MADE FOR WOMEN

This dissertation began by presenting a historical backdrop of the "long twelfth century" to situate how women living within the socio-economic milieus of court or convent were afforded opportunities for the acquisition of literacy. The majority of women's monastic houses in Western Europe during this period were populated by the daughters, wives, and widows of noble families, some taking the veil, obtaining an education in Latin alongside one another. Building upon this foundation of literate women, I demonstrated through examples of manuscripts made for noblewomen the range of genres they read which revealed an interest in not only the expected devotional works, but also in histories, poetry, and romance texts. Noblewomen exhibited an ability to read books written in Latin as well as their native language. Their attention to reading works of history displayed a desire to affirm a dynastic continuity in a memorial manner, and an interest in the "latest in reading fashion" represented by romances and works of poetry in the vernacular demonstrated women's influence on change and innovation within book culture during this renaissance.

In each case, I discussed how noblewomen acquired their books, showing that they actively attained the books they found valuable to read primarily through commission, using their social and economic status to support the production of manuscripts; often resulting in

richly decorated books from binding to page decoration. These findings suggest that women within a court setting were engaged in shaping their own reading practice. Further, I showed that the development of new genres, as well as works composed in languages other than Latin, were two literary aspects new to the twelfth century supported by female readers at court. Thus, my research of the books made for noblewomen tells us that their contribution to the manuscript culture of this period was influential to the shift from Latin to vernacular reading, not only in devotional works, but also in new genres meant for entertainment.

Likewise, the esteemed position accorded to religious women's continuous pious devotion acted as a form of social currency during the Middle Ages, where their prayers were just as valuable and influential as the wealth or noble affiliations which their community held. My research showed that nuns shared a common interest in reading works of history, poetry, similar to noblewomen, as well as the liturgical books necessary for daily devotional practice. This shared reading practice is important because it presents an awareness by women in both court and convent that books were useful not only for religious devotion, but also for education and memorial purposes. In chapter three I pointed out that convent libraries not only included the books necessary for the celebration of the Liturgy, but also a number of books that went beyond their most basic devotional needs: examples include Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* and *De natura rerum* (London, British Library, Harley 3099) used for education, or books of theological exegesis by near-contemporaries, such as Rupert of Deutz, which guided their spiritual development. Nuns used manuscript *vitae* of saints to secure their communities' connections to holy founders. They also corresponded in Latin verse with respected members of twelfth-century monastic society, thus displaying a high level of literacy. This range of reading practices supports my main thesis by demonstrating that women within a convent setting were actively partaking in the book culture of the twelfth century, reading books that addressed their community's needs. I further showed that nuns acquired the books they deemed valuable through acts of commission, exchange, and in certain instances, nuns produced their own books adding to their convent book collection. Their role in the production of manuscripts, whether as patron or scribe, reinforces my argument that women were engaged in the manuscript tradition of the period.

3. BOOKS MADE BY WOMEN

Taking up this thread, in chapter four I addressed the contribution of women to manuscript culture during the twelfth century where they worked as authors and scribes, which I supported by examples of

books made by women. Although there are indeed a few instances of a noblewoman authoring a text, the extant evidence comes primarily from a convent milieu. This aspect tells us that women in religious communities were more inclined to use the resources for manuscript production than those in a court setting. Yet, it also confirms a female scribal culture that actively participated in the physical creation of books they wanted to read. The majority of these scribal centers were located in the regions of medieval Germany; however, they are also evident in England and the Low Countries, where scribes might be a confessed nun, canoness, or lay-sister. I showed that women worked together on the manual production of books for their reading needs; some so respected that they received requests for manuscripts from outside their convent walls. Teams of female copyists and illuminators existed at the communities in Admont, Augsburg, Schäftlarn, Wessobrunn, Lamspringe, and also at Bingen and Hohenburg, which tells us that women held the skills needed to copy, illustrate, and sometimes bind, a manuscript.

Indeed, those women who did not have a dedicated scriptorium still found ways to adapt their books to reflect their personal reading experience through the addition of important memorials within a psalter calendar, amending prayers to blank folia or a final quire, or changing the text from a masculine Latin reading to one that addressed a female reader. This study has therefore raised important questions about what constitutes a scriptorium in a women's community. Catalog descriptions are hesitant to say more than "workshop" when describing manuscripts copied by more than one female scribe. It is a slight difference in definition, but holds a much stronger implication toward levels of skill and quantity. Thus, the findings of this dissertation can be used for further research on women's scriptoria during the twelfth century, which would expand our knowledge broadly on their role in the transmission of manuscript culture, and more precisely, on women's contribution to script development, use of reading aids, and other codicological choices made by scribes.

4. READING AIDS IN WOMEN'S BOOKS

The twelfth century is considered as a foundational period for various types of advances in the presentation of the page, which helped the reader navigate the physical manuscript, utilizing images, content tables, titles, or headings. In the last chapter of this dissertation I showed how women used paratextual features within manuscripts by examining a cross-section of the most common books owned by both noblewomen and nuns: psalters and sermons. I looked for the absence or inclusion of ten types of reading aids; some were "standard" by the twelfth century,

while others were still developing. My results indicated that women were adept in using conventional aides, such as images and a hierarchy of scripts delineating the sections on the page; they were also proficient in using features placed in the margins guiding the reader to "extra" information. Women's interaction with the physical object presents a valuable contribution to our understanding of how they read their books. The fact that both noblewomen and nuns showed a familiarity with employing reading aids, which helped the reader navigate the page as well as the manuscript as a whole, suggests a selective reading practice by women that deserves further scholarly attention.

5. TWELFTH-CENTURY RENAISSANCE

In answer to Kelly's challenge, throughout this study I have consciously pursued a narrative which presents women's contribution to the book culture of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance according to their own reading preferences, which in turn shaped their reading practice. Instead of looking at a singular person or location, my dissertation focused on the books, presenting a corpus of manuscripts attributed to the direct engagement of women within a court or convent setting during this period. The evidence indicates that women's contribution to the book culture of this period was much more than the "extraordinary" accomplishments of a single woman, such as Hildegard of Bingen, or the "unique" instances of a female scribe. Further, by categorizing the genres which highlight the preferred reading trends by twelfth-century women within the court or convent, accompanied by how they interacted as a reader, my research strengthens our understanding of women's contribution as a whole to the book history of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance, which could serve as a base for future studies.

The manuscript examples have provided an insight into how the social and cultural backgrounds of the participants involved shaped the choices that went into the physical production of a book. Women's books were not of inferior quality in either production or content, but instead show that scribes were given supplies as accorded to the manuscript's use, or the resources of the scriptorium, and not the gender of the reader or scribe. Each chapter of this dissertation has built a clearer picture of women's engagement in the book culture of the twelfth century. Through compiling a corpus of manuscripts, both surviving and lost, my dissertation has aimed to show that women's contribution to the book culture of the twelfth century as a patron, scribe, and reader was more substantial to this period's renaissance than previously believed. Women in both court and convent settings found ways to acquire the books they wanted to read using their social status and literary skills.

The results of this research support my answer to Kelly's challenge: that women within a court or convent setting were actively engaged in determining their reading patterns and preferences, ranging from a role as a patron, a reader, to the physical act of composing, copying, or decorating manuscripts affirming women's participation in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance.