

CMRS Colloquium: November 8, 2021

“*Ancrene Wisse* and Its Readers: Reappraising Medieval Women’s Education and Critical Readership”

Abstract

Most scholars assume some level of vernacular literacy among the women readers of the *Ancrene Wisse* but tend to dismiss advanced Latinity as exceptional. These scholars claim that the more advanced Latin passages in the *AW* were directed not at the intended audience of anchoresses but at the women’s spiritual supervisors. At best, these scholars conclude that women’s Latin education and literacy skills would only have included basic equipping for spiritual devotion: hearing, memorizing, and reciting prayers and Scriptures, and perhaps learning enough Latin to recognize these texts in devotional manuals such as books of hours.

In my book in progress, “*Curteise ert e enseigné*”: *English Laywomen’s Learning and Literacy and the Ancrene Wisse in the Thirteenth Century*, I reexamine these conclusions and push them further, considering new textual as well as manuscript evidence, to demonstrate that the *AW*’s early thirteenth-century readers, particularly those who were of a higher socioeconomic status, were trained to read and comprehend not just the vernacular but Latin as well. I argue that such training would have enabled these readers to comprehend the entire text of the *AW* and participate in manuscript culture to a greater degree than has been demonstrated before in the scholarship. Because the Nero manuscript has been greatly understudied, it is fertile ground for this project. Particularly, it contains a good deal of thirteenth-century marginalia which have never been catalogued or examined before now, a mass of information that sheds light on the literacy of the early readers, both their Latin and vernacular reading and writing abilities, and their use and commissioning of books, particularly Nero.

In today’s colloquium, I’ll discuss the chapter of this book manuscript that I’m currently working on, in which I examine evidence for literacy from the earliest textual version of the *AW*. This evidence includes Latin passages, authorial expectations of solitary reading, the *AW* as a reference manual, and textual evidence for reader participation in manuscript culture.

My research more broadly is focused on women’s literacy and education in medieval England, and I will be very glad to include that in the discussion as well. Looking forward to seeing you all there!

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Abstract

Dr. Hall’s work has advocated strongly for a more comprehensive account of anchoresses’ literary attainment and Latinity in the thirteenth century. Her consultation of the prevailing evidence for medieval women’s education as well as her close reading of *Ancrene Wisse* itself urge us to reexamine with fresh eyes the centrality of women in the creation, mediation, and consumption of the anchoritic guide. Following Dr. Hall’s presentation, we will jump forward in time to the later Middle Ages to confront similar historical and methodological questions.

As a respondent, I will discuss briefly my research on the Latin *Wisse*, specifically the witness extant in Oxford, Magdalen Library MS lat. 67 (s. xv^{med}). This research is set to appear in the forthcoming collection, *Beyond the Window: Devotion, Materiality, and Reclusion in Medieval Europe (1080–1400)*, edited by Michelle Sauer and Joshua Easterling. The Magdalen manuscript offers perhaps the most complete and tantalizing provenance history of any *Ancrene Wisse* manuscript. Owned and annotated by a preacher-turned-recluse named John Dygon, the manuscript is filled with marginal annotations and manicules. Yet, another figure lurks beyond the text’s margins: Joanna Grenewode, an anchoress with whom Dygon shared a close relationship and who, I argue, was a clear stakeholder in the text’s production.

I take as my starting place the same question that Dr. Hall raises in her work: What interpretive possibilities arise when we abandon the assumption that advanced Latinity necessarily precluded women’s participation in a text? I will consult the annotations left by Dygon in this copy of the Latin *Wisse* to show how similar complexities regarding gender, textual ownership, and literary engagement with the *Wisse* endured into the fifteenth century. As is the case with the Nero manuscript, these annotations have yet to be explored in depth. Where we may situate women (such as the enigmatic Joanna Grenewode) within this flurry of literary activity remains a pressing question—a question which strikes at the heart of Dr. Hall’s contributions to the field.

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Handout

Ancrene Wisse Text

First version, written for 3 sisters: London, British Library, Cotton MS. **Nero** A.xiv (fols. 1a-120b), ca.1225-1250

Author-revised second version, written for broader audience:

- (C) London, British Library, Cotton MS. **Cleopatra** C.vi (fols. 2a-203b), ca.1225-30
- (T) London, British Library, Cotton MS. **Titus** D. xviii (fols. 14a-105a), ca.1225-50
- (A) Cambridge, **Corpus** Christi College, MS 402, ca.1230
- (F) London, British Library, Cotton MS. **Vitellius** F.vii (fols. 2a-70a), s.xivⁱⁿ
- (V) Oxford, Bodleian MS. Eng. Poet. a.1 (fols. 371b-392a) [the **Vernon** MS], s.xiv^{ex}

AW as Reference Manual

- (1) **Moni cunnes fondunge is i þis feorðe dale, misliche frouren ant monifalde saluen. Vre Laured 3eowe ow grace þet ha ow moten helpen. Of alle þe oþre, þenne, is schrift þe biheueste. Of hit schal beon þe fifte dale, as Ich bihet þruppe; ant neomeð 3eme hu each an dale falleð into oþer, as Ich þear seide.¹**

(Temptation of many kinds is in this fourth part, and various comforts and manifold remedies. May the Lord give you grace so that they might help you. Of all the others, then, confession is the most beneficial. The fifth part shall be about that, as I promised above; and pay attention to how each single part flows into the next, as I said there.)

- (2) **Nu 3e habbeð alle ihaued, as Ich understonde, þe sixtene stucchen þe Ich bihet to dealen; ant alle Ich habbe tobroken ham ow, mine leoue sustren, as me deð to children þe mahten wið unbroke bread deien on hunger. Ah me is, þet wite 3e, moni crome edfallen; secheð ham ant gederið, for ha beoð sawle fode.²**

(Now you have had, as I understand, all the sixteen pieces that I promised to separate out; and I have broken them all up for you, my dear sisters, as one does for children who might die of hunger with unbroken bread. Moreover, you may be sure, many crumbs have fallen down; seek them and gather them, for they are food for the soul.)

- (3) **“God hit wot, moni oþer wot lutel of þisse eise, auh beoð ful ofte iderued mid wone and mid scheome and mid teone. In hire hond 3if þis cumeð, hit mei beon ham uroure” (“God knows that many others know little of this ease, but they are very often afflicted with deprivation and shame and suffering. If this comes into their hand, it might be a comfort to them”).³**

¹ Millett, EETS I.113.1704-8 (4.97)

² Ibid., I.129.586-590 (5.32).

³ Millett, EETS I.73 n.4. This line appears in the two paragraphs in Nero dedicated to the three sisters. These two paragraphs are either omitted or modified in all the later texts. This specific line is completely omitted in Cleopatra, Corpus, Titus, and Vernon.

- (4) **De salmes beoð inumene efter þe fif leattres of ure Leafdis nome, hwa-se nimeð 3eme of þisse word maria; he mei ivinden þer inne þe vorme vif lettres of ðeos biuoreseide psalmes; ant al þis ilke ureisun, efter hire fif heste blisses, eorneð bi fiue. Tele i þe antefnes, ant tu schalt finden in ham gretunges fiue.**⁴

(The Psalms are chosen following the five letters of Our Lady's name. If anyone takes heed of this word Maria, he can find in it the first five letters of these beforesaid Psalms; and all this same set prayer, following her five greatest joys, is arranged by five. Count in the antiphons, and you will find in them five salutations.)

Magnificat, Ad Dominum, Retribue, In conuertendo, Ad te leuau; these are given and expanded on above, at 1.19 – 1.23.⁵

A (likely woman) reader indexed these Psalms, the five Joys of Mary, in a thirteenth-century hand by adding a reference in Latin to each of the Joys where it appears in the section.⁶

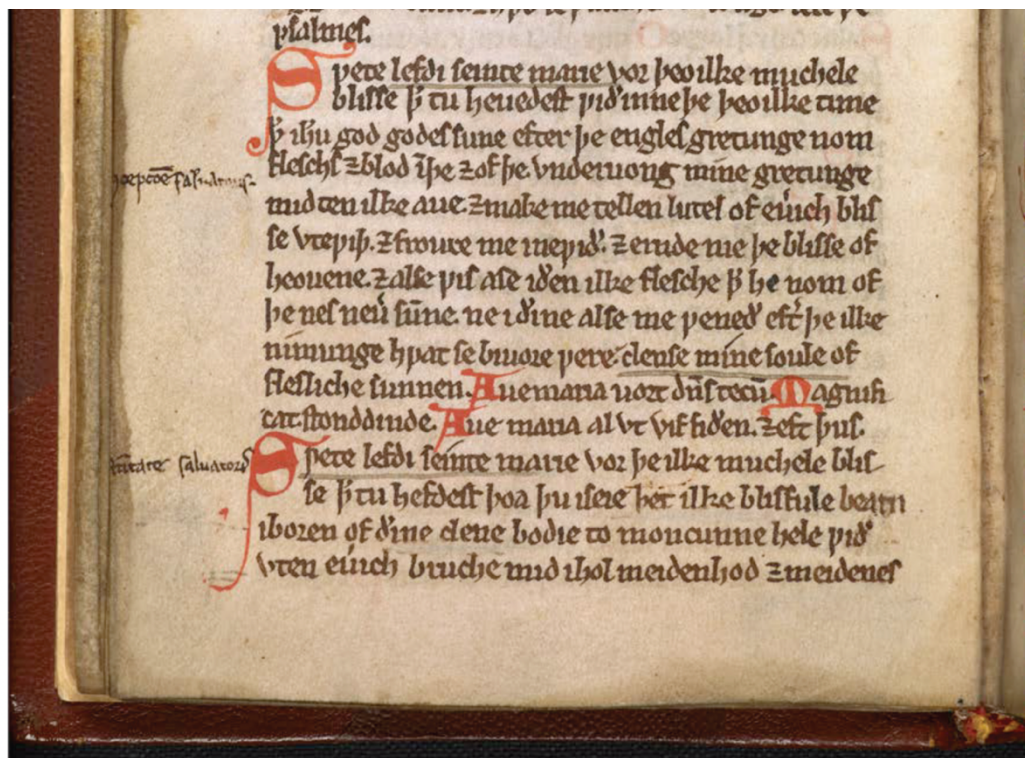


Figure 4.3 © The British Library Board, London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A.xiv, fol. 8b. The first two Joys of Mary appear in the outer margin between ll. 19-20 and at 27.

⁴ Ibid., I.17.353-6 (1.24); see also *ibid.*, II.41.I.353-4.

⁵ Ibid., I.14.275-15.285, I.15-286-293, I.15.294-302, I.303-309, and I.310-315.

⁶ For further discussion, see “Women’s Latinity in the Early English Anchorhold,” in *Women Intellectuals and Leaders in the Middle Ages*, edited by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, and John van Engen (D. S. Brewer, 2020), 277–289. As I note there, it is possible a later scribe added these marginal annotations, perhaps overtly directing readers to the appropriate place to find the “gretunges”; yet, as I have proposed before, without direct evidence, it is unwise to assume a male annotator rather than a female.

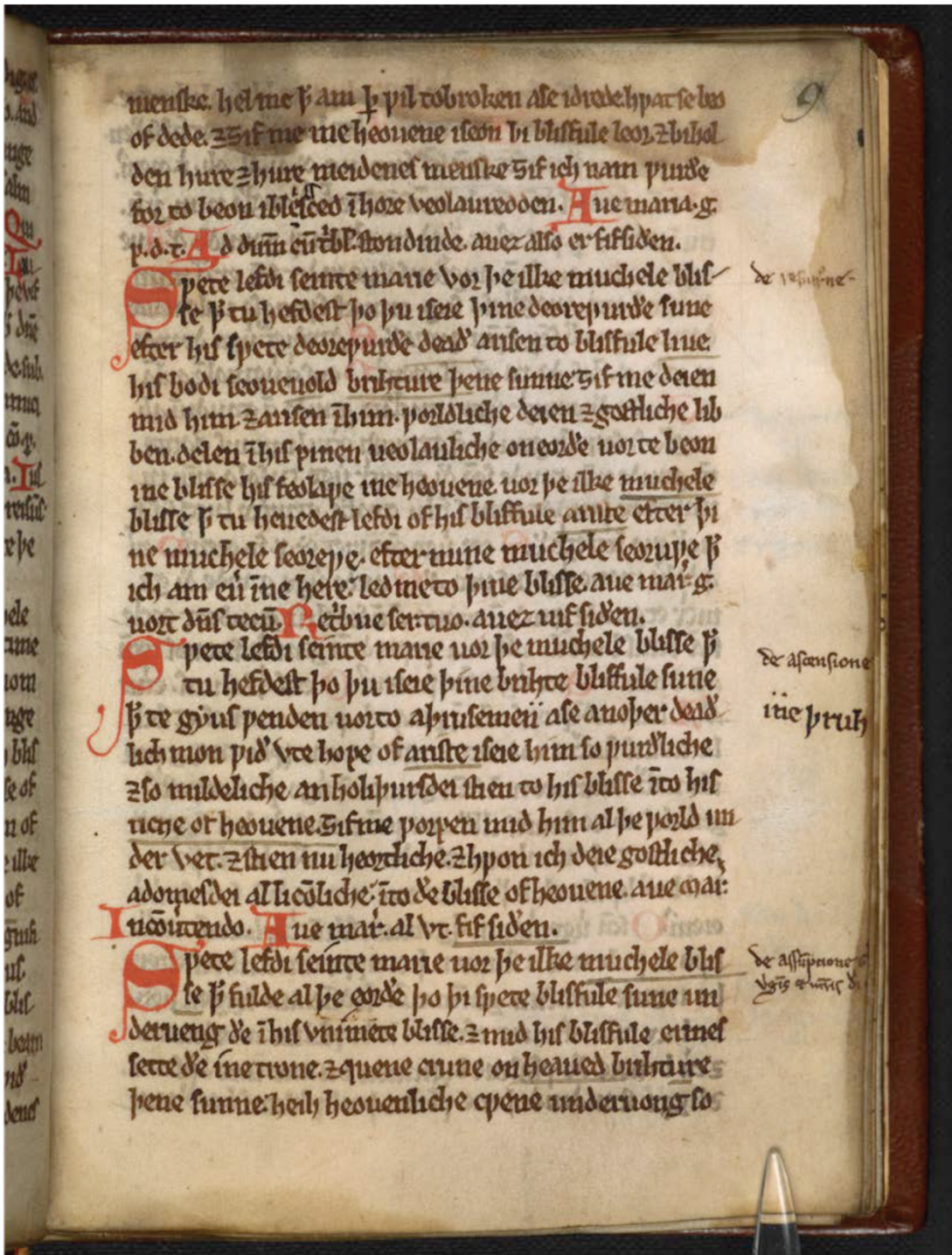


Figure 4.4 © The British Library Board, London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero A.xiv, fol. 9a. The last three Joys of Mary appear in the outer margin at ll. 6, 17, and at 26-7. A different, correcting hand (not the main scribe), appears at l. 19 (see Day, EETS 17 n.14).

Book Use, Ownership, and Participation in Manuscript Culture

- (5) “Nabbe 3e [bis] alswa of Ruffin þe deouel, Beliales broðer, in ower Englische boc of Seinte Margarete?” (“Do you not also have [this same kind of story] of Ruffin the devil, Belial’s brother, in your English book about Saint Margaret?”).⁷
- (6) Ofte, leoue sustren, 3e schulen uri lease forte redder mare. Redunge is god bone. Redunge teacheð hu ant hwet me bidde, ant beode biȝet hit efter. Amidde þe redunge, hwen þe heorte likeð, kimeð up a deuotiuþ þet is wurð monie benen. For-þi seið Sein Ierome: *Ieronimus: Semper in manu tua sacra sit lectio; tenenti tibi librum sompnus subripiat, et cadentem faciem pagina sancta suscipiat.* ‘Hali redunge beo eauer I þine honden; slep ga upo þe as þu lokest þron, ant te hali pagne ikepe þi fallinde neb.’ Swa þu schalt redder ȝeornliche ant longe.⁸

(Often, dear sisters, you should pray less in order to read more. Reading is good prayer. Reading teaches how and what one might pray, and prayer obtains it afterwards. During reading, when it pleases the heart, arises a devotion that is worth many prayers. That is why St. Jerome says: *Jerome: Holy reading should always be in your hand; sleep should steal over you as you hold the book, and the holy page should always support your drooping head.* ‘May holy reading always be in your hands; may sleep come upon you as you look over it, and may the holy page receive your drooping face.’ So you should read eagerly and at length.)

- (7) Of alle þulliche þing schriue hire euche wike eanes ed te leaste. For nan se lutel nis of þeos þet te deouel naued enbreyet on his rolle; ah schrift hit schrapeð of, ant makeð him to leosen muchel of his hwile. Ah al þet schrift ne schrapeð of, al he wule o Domesdei rede ful witerliche forte bicleopie þe wið; a word ne schal þer wontin. Nu þen, Ich reade, ȝeoueð him to writen þet leaste þet ȝe eauer mahen, for na meoster nis him leouere. Ant hwet-se he writ, beoð umben to schrapien hit of cleanliche; wið na þing ne mahe ȝe matin him betere.⁹

(Of all these aforementioned things an anchoress should confess at least once each week. For none of these is so small that the devil has not recorded it on his roll. But confession scrapes it off, and causes him to lose much of his time. But whatever confession does not scrape off, all of that he will at Judgment Day undoubtedly read in order to accuse you with it; no word shall be lacking. Now then, I advise that you give him as little to write as you may, for there is no occupation he likes better. And whatever he writes, be busy with cleanly scraping it out. There is no better way for you to confound him.)

- (8) Hwa is ontful þe bihalt wið ehnen of bileaue hu Iesu Godd, nawt for his god ah for oþres god, dude ant seide ant þolede al þet he þolede? Þe ontful ne kepte nawt þet eani dealde of his god; ant Godd almihti ȝet efter al þet oþer lihte dun to helle | forte sechen feolahes, ant to deale wið ham þe god þet he hefde. Lo nu, hu frommard beoð ontful ure Lauerd. Þe ancre þe wearnde anoþer a cwaer to lane, f[e]or ha hefde heoneward hire bileaue ehe.¹⁰

(Who is envious who sees with the eyes of faith how the Lord Jesus, not for his own good, but for the good of others, did and said and suffered all that he suffered? The envious would not desire that any should share in their possessions; but God Almighty still, after all that, descended down to hell to seek companions, and to share with them the possessions that he had. See now, how contrary are the envious to our Lord. The anchoress who refused another a quire on loan would have the eye of her faith turned far from here.)

⁷ Millett, EETS I.93.930-32 (4.55). The eME *Life of Saint Margaret* appears in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 34 (early thirteenth-century) and London, British Library, Royal 17A.xxvii (in the portion which dates from the first half of the thirteenth century). It is tempting to identify the “Englische boc” as one of these two manuscripts, though of course that cannot be done with certainty..

⁸ Millett, EETS I.109.1553-61 (4.92). Latin trans. Millett, *Ancrene Wisse: A Guide for Anchoresses* 109.

⁹ Ibid., I.129.599-I.130.606; I.130.610-618 (5.35), my emphasis.

¹⁰ Millett, EETS I.94.984-990 (4.58).

- (9) **Vnnen þet al þe luueð þe luuede ham ase þe, ant dude ham froure as þe. 3ef þu hauest cnif oðer clað, oðer mete oðer drunch, scrowe oðer cwaer, hali monne froure, oðer ei oþer þing þet ham walde freamien, vnnen þet tu hefdest wonte þe seolf þrof, wið | þon þet heo hit hefden.**¹¹

(Wish that all who love you love them [other anchoresses] in the way they love you, and give them comfort, as they do you. If you have a knife or a garment, or food or drink, parchment or quire, the comfort of holy people, or anything else that would be of comfort to them, be willing that you might have want of it yourself, so that they might have it.)

- (10) **Þe 3iscere is his eskibah. Feareð abuten esken, ant bisiliche stureð him to rukelin togederes muchele ant monie ruken; blaweð þrin ant blent him seolf, peaðereð ant madeð þrin figures of augrim, as þes rikeneres doð þe habbeð muche to rikenin.**¹²

(The covetous person is his fire-tender.¹³ He busies himself with the ashes, and diligently bestirs himself to heap up together a great many piles. He blows upon them and blinds himself, stirs [or pokes] the ashes and makes in them Arabic numerals, as the accountants do who have much to calculate.)

Further Reading

“Could Medieval Women Read?” <https://sites.nd.edu/manuscript-studies/2021/04/14/could-medieval-women-read/>: a summary, with lots of pictures, to why my answer to this question is YES.

"[Women's Education and Literacy in England, 1066–1540](#)," in *History of Education Quarterly* (Apr 2021), open access on Cambridge Core (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2021.8>); also includes *lots* of bibliography.

The corresponding HEQ podcast (<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/womens-education-and-literacy-in-england-1066-1540/id1562322167?i=1000522944821>) sums up the article and also offers suggestions for opportunities for scholarship on this topic.

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¹¹ Ibid., I.107.1510-14 (4.90).

¹² Ibid., I.82.515-18 (4.33). The passage as quoted appears in Corpus, Cleopatra, and Titus with only minor variations (e.g., the spelling of “eskibah”). In Nero “ash-bather” is spelled as “askebaðie” and is followed by the additional phrase “z lið euer iþen asken.” In Vitellius no term is given; the author/translator describes the covetous man not as his cinderjack but simply as “son despit / enfant qest touz iours / entour la ceindre” (“his shameful child who is always among the cinders”; Herbert, EETS 140.35-37), the latter part as in Nero (Millett, EETS II.158.4.515).

¹³ The *Electronic MED* gives the definition of “aske-bāði(e, aske-bāðe (n.))” as “Fire-tender [lit., one who bathes in or messes with ashes]; -- used contemptuously,” and characterizes it as an Old Norse agent noun.

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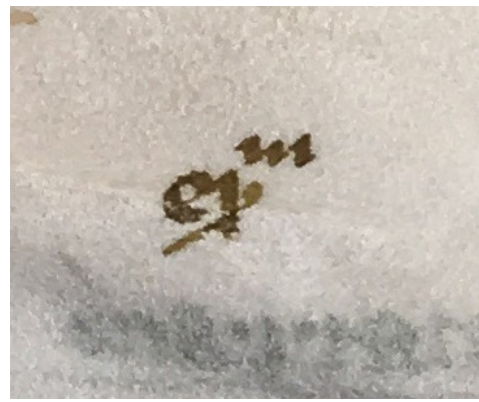
Orate pro animabus Iohannis Dygon’ presbiteri et Reclusi de Bethelhem de Shene et domine Iohanne Anachorite sancti Botulphi ecclesie extra Bysschoppysgate London’ qui hunc librum dederunt Exon’ Collegio Oxon’ ad vsum ibidem existencium studencium et verbum dei predicare volencium ad dei honorem et ad suorum et aliorum animarum salutem...

(Pray for the souls of John Dygon, priest and recluse of Bethlehem of Sheen, and the lady Joanna, anchoress of St Botolph-without-Bishopsgate, London, who have given this book to Exeter College, Oxford, for the use of the students dwelling in that same place who desire to preach the word of God both for God’s honor and for the salvation of their souls and the souls of others.)

Fig. 1. Gift inscription from Oxford, St John’s College, MS 77, fol. 2. For transcription, see Hanna, “Producing Magdalen College MS lat. 93,” 155, note 35. Translation my own.



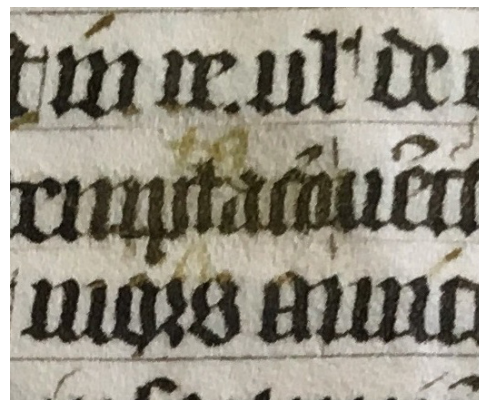
(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Fig. 2. Magdalen College, MS lat. 67: John Dygon’s Annotations. Examples featured: (a) manicule on fol. 60v; (b) notation for *exemplum* on fol. 60v; (c) main text scribe’s section headings with Dygon’s marginal brackets on fol. 5r; and (d) partially erased *signe-de-renvoi* on fol. 34r.

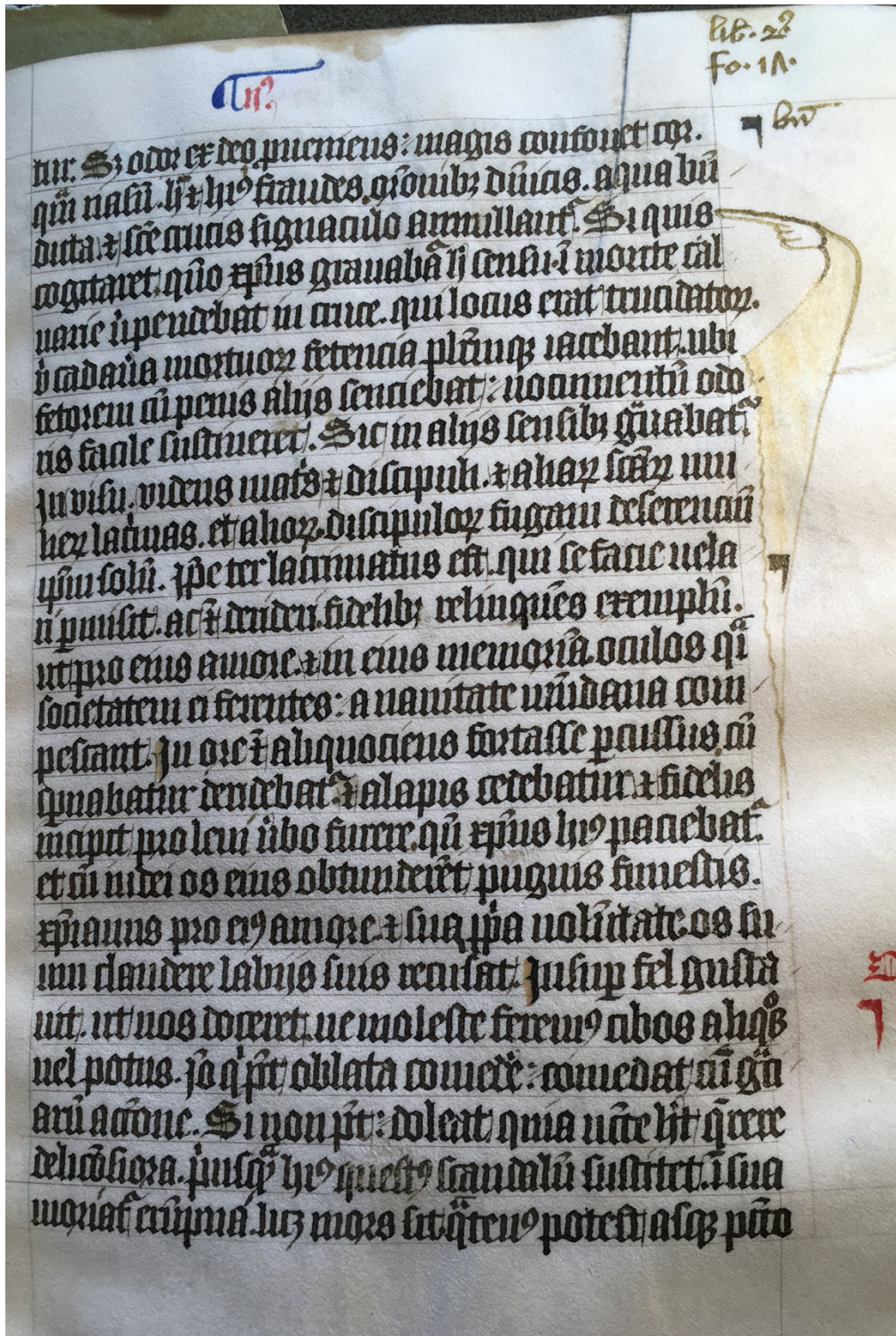


Fig. 3. Magdalen College, MS lat. 67, fol. 17r: Dynamic Manicule.

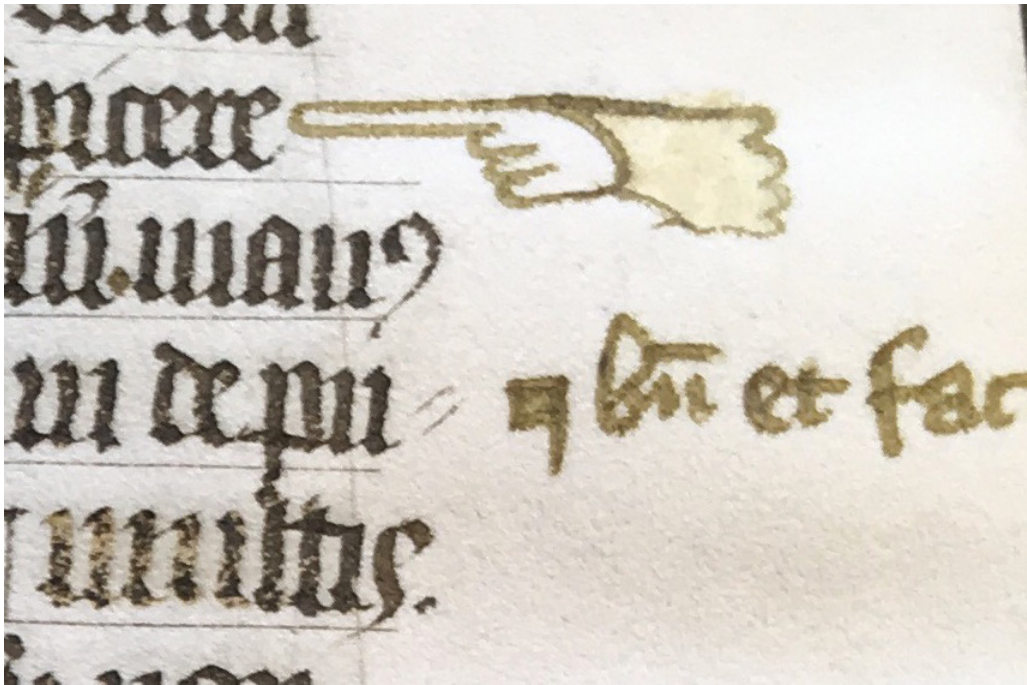


Fig. 4. Magdalen College, MS lat. 67, fol. 19r: Manicule and *nota bene et fac*.

Further Reading

Editions and Translations

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