‘Attend to Me’: Julian of Norwich, Margaret Gascoigne and Textual Circulation among the Cambrai Benedictines

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For scholars seeking to problematize traditional historical boundaries, the English Benedictine convent at Cambrai has provided tantalizing evidence of Catholic continuities across the medieval and early modern divide. Augustine Baker famously encouraged the Cambrai nuns to read medieval mystical works and the community responded by reading, copying and excerpting texts such as The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton’s Scale of Perfection and Julian of Norwich’s Revelation of Divine Love. Indeed, the Devotions of Margaret Gascoigne (1608–37) have principally garnered scholarly attention because of their engagement with Julian’s Revelation. Arguing that Gascoigne relived Julian’s text, Nancy Bradley Warren has contended that ‘[p]ast lives … are part of an ongoing process of individual and communal becoming that reaches forward as well as backward.’ Yet the critical focus on Julian’s role in the Devotions has resulted in readings that tend to look ‘backward’ rather than ‘forward’. In chapter 42, Gascoigne reflects at length on a brief passage from Julian’s thirteenth revelation: ‘Thou hast saide, O Lorde, to a deere child of thine, Lette me alone, my deare worthy childe, intende (or attende) to me, I am inough to thee:

Elisabeth Dutton has rightly observed that using ‘attend’ to gloss ‘intend’ limits the meaning of this passage, concluding that this interpolation ‘appears to do violence to Julian’s text in its efforts to make her text easier to read.’ Nevertheless, this focus on the preservation of Julian’s language precludes any nuanced understanding of how this gloss and the Devotions reflect the priorities of the Cambrai house, which adapted and appropriated mystical texts for collective and individual purposes. This essay offers another approach to Gascoigne’s Devotions by tracing the forward movement of two phrases drawn from Julian’s Revelation – ‘thou art enough to me’ and ‘attend to me’ – within the Cambrai convent. As members of the community read and rewrote Julian and then Gascoigne, these expressions gained spiritual authority through their associations with both women and subsequently became bywords for the contemplative methods practiced by the house. The development of these commonplaces thus reveals how intertextual literary practices created a shared spiritual vocabulary that expressed Cambrai’s communal identity.

Adapting Julian of Norwich: Margaret Gascoigne’s Devotions

Margaret Gascoigne professed at Cambrai in 1629, the very year that the election of her sister Catherine Gascoigne as abbess marked the ascendancy of Augustine Baker’s spiritual methods within the convent. Opposing the set prayers that were popular among Catholics in early modern Europe, Baker encouraged each nun to find her own spiritual call through pious reading: ‘Let the soul ever have some book or paper at hand, by which she may help herself for matter of prayer according to her need, so that she be not then overmuch to seek, but may have ... some way or other to exercise herself towards God.’ By creating commonplace books filled with pious excerpts from authoritative works, Baker and the Cambrai nuns amassed ready sources of such ‘matter for prayer.’ Baker himself gathered three volumes of devout collections for the house, while Catherine Gascoigne and Clementia Cary respectively compiled

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4 Colwich Abbey, ms 18, 155–56, emphasis in text.