Women and Englishness: Anglo-Saxon Female Saints in the South English Legendary.

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A growing interest in ideas of group identity, especially with regards to the development of nationhood, has seen some very interesting works on early English identity. However, women and their role in creation of ideas of identity have largely been ignored. This article attempts to redress this balance, by focusing on one of the early collections of saints’ lives found in Middle English, the South English Legendary. Three Anglo-Saxon female saints’ lives are found in three of the extant manuscripts, and the lives are examined to see if the acts of identity performed through these texts are noticeably different from their male counterparts. The ownership and readership of the manuscripts are also briefly considered, in order to understand the impact of such lives on the audience.¹

English Identity²

The inhabitants of the land currently called England have identified themselves as English from at least around the time of King Alfred.³ This identity seems to owe much to two particular instances in English history: Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, wherein he outlined the traits of an English church, and King Alfred’s nostalgic re-imagining of a unified country.⁴ What is more surprising is that English identity survived the Norman Conquest, survived the replacement of the English nobility with Norman invaders, and eventually encompassed the Normans themselves, to the point that they became self-described as English, and this despite the fact that some English people today still claim descent from the Norman invasion.⁵ Hugh M. Thomas provides an in-depth study of the various processes involved with assimilation, and points out that the survival of ‘English’ as the identity for the inhabitants of England is a complex issue. He comes to the conclusion that while '[t]he construction of identity did get bound up in politics in medieval England, [...] there is no evidence of any effort by kings or political elites to impose English identity. Instead it moved upwards, and the kings were the last to become thoroughly English after 1066.’⁶ This upward momentum goes against commonly accepted theories of identity, where the mother-tongue might be retained for use at home, while the language of the elite is that used for business and governance. Thomas provides a plausible reason for how the English went against the trend, pointing to the English Church:

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² This article is focused on England and ideas of Englishness. For the purposes of this article, then, “England” and “English” will be used to refer to the area south of the Humber and east of the Severn. Other areas of Britain and its neighbouring islands will be referred to as “British”.


⁵ Thomas, The English and the Normans, pp. 14, 134.

⁶ Thomas, The English and the Normans, p. 11. Thomas identifies some of the key issues as being: intermarriage among the aristocracy (discussed in chapters 9 & 10); the majority of the population being English (chapters 11 & 12); and the townspeople ,who interacted most closely with the Normans in trade, being English (chapter 12).

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If any group can be described as the *Traditions kern* ['nucleus of tradition'] of English identity in the post-conquest period, it was the English clergy. [...] [A] number of clerical and monastic writers seized control of the ethnic discourse by preserving English traditions and defending English honour. Many of these writers were demonstrably of at least partial English ancestry, and the survival of many natives in the church gave them a favourable environment in which to work. [...] I would argue that the English religious, working as prestigious insiders within the church, were [...] crucial to the survival and spread of English identity.

These clerical writers include chroniclers such as William of Malmesbury (c.1090-1143), who had “the blood of both nations in [his] veins”; Henry of Huntingdon (c.1088-1156), who was also of mixed parentage; and Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1155); and hagiographers such as the Flemish Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (c.1040-1114) and the English Osbert of Clare (d.1158). Of these, only Goscelin of Saint-Bertin was a true immigrant; while the others may have been influenced by their upbringing, and those of mixed parentage may have been influenced particularly by the role of their mother and the mother-tongue in the development of their own identity, they were still writing within and for a primarily Norman elite. Chroniclers and hagiographers had different foci in their works, but both groups were (re-)presenting and reiterating a positive idea of England.

Thus, in the search for a sense of post-Conquest English identity, chronicles and royal declarations have frequently been cited. More recently, the works of hagiographers, and their Anglo-Saxon saints’ lives, have been discussed with reference to the role they played in making Englishness an identity which was attractive to a range of people, as has been seen in Thomas’ work. Hagiographies are valuable because of their prevalence – one of the more popular forms of text in circulation, in a range of languages – and because of their style. Most hagiographies do not directly address the concept of a national identity, and it is when writer and readers make assumptions that we can most clearly see the ways in which they were thinking about these ideas. The roles of saints in the protection of the land, the healing of the people, and the punishing of the wrong-doers reveal important ways for constructing a sense of Englishness.

What has not yet been addressed, however, is the role which women play in the process of constructing or presenting an idea of Englishness, both as readers and as subjects to be read. Anglo-Saxon female saints are from royal households and many of their interactions are with royalty, but at the same time, common people are free to approach saints. Thus, these women influenced a wide range of society in early medieval England, and their hagiographies, especially those in English, would have expanded these areas of influence. This article will consider the potential effects of a female audience on one particular text, the *South English Legendary*, which contains a number of Anglo-Saxon female saints’ lives. Currently, there is very little written on women and national identity in the Middle Ages, and none on English women. Thus, this study considers how female readers might have been catered for in the composition of this text, and how the reading of such a text might have affected the ideas of Englishness in its audience.

The *South English Legendary* and Englishness

In a land, in an imagined community where, in 1218, peasants could “assert their personal freedom or privileges as ‘villien sokemen’” – appealing to clauses in the Magna Carta of 1215 – it would appear that national identity in some form had trickled down to all layers. Women also partook of this new sense of Englishness, reading and possibly requesting collections of English saints, and particularly Anglo-Saxon female saints. Saints from the Anglo-Saxon period had an ongoing presence after the Conquest, and their lives continued to be rewritten. Where many English saints’ lives were previously written for a

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*Thomas, The English and the Normans,* pp. 200-1
particular religious house, by the late thirteenth century they are found attached to larger collections of more universal saints.

One such collection, the *South English Legendary*, exists in more than sixty extant manuscript copies, none of which contain precisely the same selection of saints. What is noticeable across the range of manuscripts is the mix of universal, or Continental, saints with English ones, and the most recent saints are Thomas Becket (d.1170), and Edmund of Canterbury (d. 1240). In three of the surviving manuscripts, three of the most popular Anglo-Saxon female saints are also included: Æthelthryth of Ely, Eadburh of Nunnaminster, and Mildrith of Thanet, while Frideswide, Oxford’s saint, occurs in two different manuscripts.

The *South English Legendary* has been investigated with reference to English identity by a range of scholars, including Thorlac Turville-Petre, Anne B. Thompson and Manfred Görlach. While Görlach has studied and edited a range of manuscripts of the *South English Legendary*, it is Thompson and Turville-Petre who have written more widely on the ideas of Englishness. However, the edition they used for the *South English Legendary* is that of the Early English Texts Society, edited from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS. 145 and British Library MS. Harley 2277. While the editors, Charlotte d’Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, also compared these manuscripts with two others, none of the manuscripts consulted included any of the Anglo-Saxon female saints.

Thus, while Thorlac Turville-Petre and Anne B. Thompson consider the *South English Legendary* with reference to the lives of English saints, or missionaries to the English, suggesting a nationalistic impulse in the recording of those parts of the text, they have not been able to consider the role of English women in the collection. Their studies are focused on men and their function in the creation of Englishness. By expanding the frame of reference, and including the Anglo-Saxon women, one may gain a more balanced view of the subject of Englishness, and the reception of those images.

Across the various extant manuscripts of the *South English Legendary*, dated to the last quarter of the thirteenth-century, almost one-fifth of the legends included are of Anglo-Saxon saints. Among these are the Anglo-Saxon women Eadburh, Æthelthryth, Mildrith and Frideswide, along with women from other British regions: Constantine’s mother, Helen; Brigit of Ireland; and the Welsh saint Winifred, though no single surviving manuscript contains all seven of these saints. These women cover a wide range of historic time, and also much of the British Isles, though there is notably no Scottish female saint. By and large, the Anglo-Saxon women are more historically attested than the ‘universal’ women included in the collections, such as Agatha, Agnes, Lucy and Ursula.

How does one go about finding “national consciousness” in literary texts? Görlach assumes that national pride played a part in the translation of saints’ lives into the English language, particularly those of Anglo-Saxon or English saints. Along with Horstmann, he considers the selection and translation into the English language of Anglo-Saxon and English saints as indicating a sense of national awareness –or Englishness – in the compilers and translators.

Renee Hamelinck, on the other hand, finds a theme within the texts of English saints

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in the *South English Legendary* which is not immediately apparent when focusing on the life of one individual. According to her:

Together the legends relate the history of the English church from the time when Christianity was first brought to England by St Augustine up to the thirteenth century when the [*South English Legendary*](http://www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au) was composed. [...]. The development of the English church as related in the legends shows how, after a period of prosperity under the Anglo-Saxon kings, its position becomes increasingly weakened after the Norman kings came to power.\(^{16}\)

Despite this overarching theme, the two versions of the prologue which are found in some *South English Legendary* manuscripts do not give any explanation of the use of English as a language, or the inclusion of English saints.\(^{17}\) The English saints are not marked out as being special or different in quality to the universal saints, and no two manuscripts contain the same collection of English saints.

Thorlac Turville-Petre, instead, sees national identity in the association of the English saints of the *South English Legendary* with the everyday people, saying that:

This humility, so constantly emphasised, is the expression of the saints’ identification with simple folk. In this way, by locating national identity among the people of England, a clerical writer can demonstrate the central part that the Church has played and still plays in supporting and representing national interests.\(^{18}\)

However, while humility is often mentioned with regards to the saints, both male and female, the texts approach it from different directions. Of the fifteen English male saints whose lives are edited by d’Evelyn and Mill (both pre- and post-Conquest), only three are kings. The others are all raised to bishop or archbishop, but they are generally from a lower class than the female saints, who are all royal daughters. Thus, the male saints are easier for the common people to identify with, while the female saints bring a different aspect to the Englishness of the *South English Legendary* – the association of royalty with the English people. Although the Anglo-Saxon female saints are also described as being humble, this humility is usually situated in the special acts of penitence which the saints perform rather than through an association with the common people.

While Turville-Petre further argues that the local importance is strengthened by the representation of the humility of the national saints found in the *South English Legendary*, there is no obvious difference in the terms used to describe national saints as compared to the universal ones.\(^{19}\) Indeed, for the Anglo-Saxon female saints in the *South English Legendary*, more weight is placed on the accounts of their high status due to their birth. All that is said of Æthelthryth’s piety, for instance, is very formulaic:

\[
\text{Clannore lif ne miʒt beo } \quad \text{pan seint Aeldrei gan lede}
\]
\[
\text{Of fastinge } \& \text{ of orisons} \quad \text{& of almes dede}
\]
\[
\text{Of suche goodness } \& \text{ holinesse } \quad \text{hire siwede inow (Æthelthryth: ll. 27-9)\(^{20}\)}
\]

More is said of the humility of Eadburh, as the story about her secretly cleaning the shoes of the nuns is related. However, the emphasis is still on the idea of ‘Pe kinges douʒter of Englonde’ (Eadburh: l. 56)\(^{21}\) polishing shoes, which serves to make a distinction between her and anyone else who might clean shoes. Thus, the humility of the saint is underlined by the performance of a menial act, as the text re-inscribes dominant social expectations.

**Anglo-Saxon Female Saints**

Turning to the specific lives of the Anglo-Saxon women, we find Æthelthryth of Ely,

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\(^{16}\) Hamelinck, p.21.


\(^{18}\) Turville-Petre, p.67.

\(^{19}\) Turville-Petre, p.67.

\(^{20}\) Quotations for Æthelthryth are from Major, pp.98-99.

\(^{21}\) Quotations for Eadburh are from Braswell, pp.325-329.
Eadburh of Nunnaminster and Mildrith of Thanet in the same three manuscripts, British Library, MS Egerton 1993 (c.1320), Bodleian Library, MS English Poetry a. 1 (the Vernon manuscript c.1380) and Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 779 (fifteenth century), with Mildrith also appearing in the National Library of Wales, MS 5043 (c. 1400). They are not, however, a contiguous collection, but are roughly placed in the calendar order of their feast days. Thus they are not a separately defined group which can be added to or omitted from a collection with ease.

Frideswide is found in more manuscripts, but only shares a manuscript with Æthelthryth, Eadburh and Mildrith in MS Bodley 779, where she is placed between Æthelthryth and Eadburh, and all three are described by Görlach as being placed in the wrong calendar order. She is also to be found in the index of the Vernon manuscript, but is missing in the text, and, like Mildrith, is present in National Library of Wales, MS 5043.

The appearance of the lives of Æthelthryth, Eadburh and Mildrith in the same three manuscripts suggests that these manuscripts, at least, could have been intended for a female audience. Whether the three lives were written at the request of a woman or women’s community, or written to educate a women’s community, either lay or monastic, the implication remains that Anglo-Saxon female saints were considered to be of interest to someone who would also be interested in a larger collection. The Anglo-Saxon female saints can therefore be understood as potentially carrying the same level of significance as the universal saints, for certain audiences.

Despite Turville-Petre’s argument for a noticeable humility, national consciousness in the Anglo-Saxon female lives in South English Legendary is more clearly portrayed through the focus on the lineage of the women. As with the male saints, one of the first thing mentioned about each of the women is that they are English. However, the lives of female saints immediately also declare them to be daughters of kings:

Seint Aeldri of Eli    god maide was & hende.
Hire fader was king of Englonde    of al þat est ende. (Æthelthryth: 1-2)

Seint Eadborw, þat holi maide, was her of engelond.
Be King Edward hir fader was, as ich understounde. (Eadburh: 1-2)

Seint Mildride þe holi mayde of kynges kunne com
Ibore heo was in Engelonde, in þe wurste cristendom. (Mildrith: 1-2)²⁵

The focus on royalty is one of the features noted by Adrian Hastings and Hugh Thomas as a key point of national pride. It is not enough that the women were English, they were also important by reason of their birth. This royalty differentiates the Anglo-Saxon female saints from many of the Anglo-Saxon male saints in the South English Legendary, but perhaps serves to bolster their importance to a lay audience, thus justifying their inclusion in the collection.

Beyond the opening lines, though, the three women are given very different genealogies. Eadburh is given twenty-six lines of family history, with an enumeration of the ‘vour Edwardes’ which ‘habeþ þe kings of þis lond ... beo’ (Eadburh: 3) ending with: ‘þe noble king þe ferþe was, þat com now late sine,| Šir Edward þe noble man, þe kinges some Henri’ (Eadburh: 10-11). The first Edward listed is Eadburh’s father, Alfred’s son, the second the son of King Edgar, and the third Æthelred the Unready’s son, Edward the Confessor. Thus connection is made, not only to King Alfred (who holds an important place in post-Conquest ideas of the pre-Conquest kingdom of England), but also to a martyr-saint, and to the last real king

²² Dates from Görlach, Textual Tradition, pp.75-77, 80-81, 102-104 & 115-116. (Elene (Helen) and Winifrid are not included in this study as being respectively legendary and Welsh.)
²³ Görlach, Textual Tradition, pp.174-175 & 196. For other manuscripts of Frideswide, see Görlach, Textual Tradition, p.196.
²⁴ See, for example, Alexandra Barratt (ed.),Women’s Writing in Middle English, Pearson, Harlow, 1992, 2010, pp.6-17.
²⁵ Quotes for Mildrith from Acker, pp.140-153.

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before William (discounting Harold, whom the Normans had presented as being a usurper).  Eadburh is placed within a historical England; not only that of her own period, but in an England with a history which continued down to the point of writing. This connection thus emphasises persistent ideas of Englishness which elide the Conquest.

Braswell’s comment on the prologue to Eadburh’s life is that it serves to provide more realism for the readers, thus distinguishing it from the universal lives in the South English Legendary, and from the sources and analogues for the text. He states:

In combining a historical prologue with the saint’s life the author achieves more than an exemplary legend of this type, however: he gives to spiritual biography historical verisimilitude and contemporary interest.27

However, Eadburh’s life is not unique in this. The first fifty-five lines of Mildrith’s life also focus on her lineage, and particularly the conversion of her family to Christianity. It starts with the conversion of her great-grandfather, Eadbald, by Laurence, Archbishop of Canterbury after Saint Augustine. It then lists her grandfather, Ermenred, followed by her two uncles, Ethelbert and Ethelred, and her mother Domne Eafe. As Acker comments, it is ‘through this genealogical prologue, the audience is brought back to the time in England which most corresponded to the time of martyrdoms and conversions in Rome.’28

Surprisingly, there is no mention in the South English Legendary version of Mildrith’s life of the martyrdoms of her uncles, who were also raised to sainthood, even though they are the usual focus of the Mildrith Legends.29 On the other hand, the story of Domne Eafe’s hind measuring out the land for the nunnery on Thanet is given in detail (Mildrith: 38-54). That the focus should be entirely on the women in the story is unusual, and again suggests a female audience for the female lives.

In contrast to Eadburh and Mildrith, Æthelthryth’s family is not given in any great detail, despite her many holy sisters and nieces. Beyond the opening couplet, there is only one more line about her father: ‘King Anne, he was ihot e riche man inow’ (Æthelthryth: 3). More mention is made of her two husbands, as also being royal:

... þe prince of þe souþ half  heis man of gret fame,
Weddede þis holi maide  Tombert was is name.
Togadere hi were lute while  ar þis man to deþe drow.
Þis holi maide was aliiue  clene of hire self inow.
So þat heo was spoused selþe  as hire fader bisay
To anoþur king of Englonde  þat me clepede Egfray. (Æthelthryth: 5-10)

So, while not emphasising Æthelthryth’s direct lineage, this life does continue the connection of the female saints with royal families.

Having firmly placed the saints in history, with their royal fathers or husbands, the South English Legendary author also appears concerned to place them in their physical locations. Æthelthryth is mentioned as being from or belonging to Ely multiple times: Seint Aeldrei of Eli (1); In þe yle of Eli  nonne heo bi com (21); Of hire me makeþ in Eli  gret feste aþer iwis (50).30 Not only does this place her within the country, but it also gives her a present location, where her yearly feast is still held. Therefore, the reader or listener has a sense of her continuing presence in their own time.

Likewise, Eadburh’s life repeats the statement that she lived and died at Winchester (39, 100), and ends with the current locations of her relics:

So þat þe abbeiþ of Pershore of Seint Eadborw is,
And þe nonerie of Winchester ek, þer heo was nonne iwis,
And Burcestre þer biside Oxneford þre canones beþ

27 Braswell, p.312.
28 Acker, p.143.
30 Though Bodely 779 has ‘in holy chirche’. See Major, p.96, for a possible explanation.
Of Seint Æðborw hii bæp all þreo, as men al day seþ. (Eadburh: 109-112)

As with Æthelthryth’s life, this information suggests a continuing presence, and gives readers locations they can journey to, to see these things for themselves. Mildrith’s life, on the other hand, is surprising in that it does not state her resting place. Minster-in-Thanet had been destroyed by Danes, and so Mildrith’s body, according to other texts, was translated to St Augustine’s Abbey, Canterbury, and would not be found where she is mentioned in the text.31

The emphasis on the continuing presence of the Anglo-Saxon saints in new versions of saints’ lives is something pointed to by Turville-Petre and Thomas as an indication of the saints’ importance, and hence their influence on ideas of Englishness.32 Here, the female saints’ lives are demonstrably being used in the same way. Thus, a (potentially female) audience is being exposed to ideas of Englishness which include women.

Audience

That the three lives of Mildrith, Eadburh and Æthelthryth are found in the same manuscripts as each other, and are not found in other manuscripts, suggests that perhaps these manuscripts were compiled with a different intention from most of the others. Blanton suggests that these three women are ‘presented as virgin daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings. ... As representatives of East Anglia, Kent and Wessex, each demonstrates a regional history of England, and this may be the reason they are grouped together.’33 However, as noted above, there is a great variation between the historical prologues to the three women’s lives, perhaps due in large part to the different kinds of sources available to the composer. If the collection of Anglo-Saxon women was intended to ‘demonstrate a regional history’, it does not appear to have been very successful. While Eadburh and Mildrith are given histories, Eadburh’s does not actually mention Wessex, Mildrith’s starts in Northumberland and mentions Mercia (where her sister Milburh lies at Wenlock) before reaching Kent. Æthelthryth, on the other hand, is not given a historical prologue, though the fact that her father was king of the ‘East end of England’ is prominent in the first lines. To read them, then, as representatives of East Anglia, Kent and Wessex is to step back from the evidence of the text and to fill in the blanks with knowledge from elsewhere. The question then becomes whether the original audience would have had that other knowledge, or whether, as seems more likely, the South English Legendary was intended to provide the greater part of the information. Reading the Anglo-Saxon women as part of a general national impulse – rather than regional representatives – seems more reasonable, especially as Frideswide appears to have been meant to accompany Eadburh, Mildrith and Æthelthryth in the Vernon manuscript, which would then have doubled up the Wessex representatives.

I would suggest, then, that these women were included specifically at the request of the original intended audience, and that they had some significance for a small group of people. The South English Legendary being what it was, there was every opportunity for a community (or three) to have their own versions of the Legendary copied especially for them, so that they could specify who was to be included. If there was no Middle English poetic version of a particular saint’s life yet in circulation, the mode of verse was such that one could be composed without too much trouble.

Görlach cautions against being too confident about locating an audience, stating that the ‘medieval homes of the [South English Legendary] MSS are practically unknown’.34 He is not encouraging about locating a nunnery as the intended audience of any extant manuscript, as ‘the addresses to the audience, the critical comments against priests and praise of the Mendicant orders [...] are hardly compatible with a collection meant for reading in a nunnery’.35 However, Görlach continues,

31 Rollason, p.19.
32 Thomas p.286-290; Turville-Petre p.67.
34 Görlach, Textual Tradition, p.45.
35 Görlach, Textual Tradition, p.48.
[t]his composite nature of the [South English Legendary] renders an evaluation difficult: if the collection is considered to be by one author who used different sources, the objections carry their full weight. But if the liturgical layer of short legends formed the basis of the [South English Legendary], these texts could well have been used in a nunnery.36

Ian Doyle points out the enormous cost of producing the Vernon manuscript, which includes the South English Legendary along with a number of other Middle English and Anglo-Norman texts – approximately £65 - £85 in the fifteenth century. This manuscript is very large (23 x15 ½ in) and ornate, hardly suitable for everyday use, but a beautiful display piece. Doyle notes that there were two female houses among the ‘samples of the sort of appropriate destination’ based on linguistic analysis which could be contenders for the Vernon manuscript: Westwood, which was attached to Fontevrault and had fourteen nuns in 1381, and Nuneaton, in Warwickshire, which forty-six nuns in 1370.37 While the expense of such a manuscript may have been prohibitive to a single nunnery, Doyle suggests that the production and reading could have been shared by neighbouring religious houses, and prefers a religious audience rather than a lay one because ‘the sheer quantity of reading matter argues for an audience or readership expected to have sufficient time and interest to benefit from more than occasional browsing in it’.38 The other two manuscripts of the South English Legendary which contain Æthelthryth, Eadburh and Mildrith are much smaller and more suitable for individual reading, or small communities. MS Bodl. 779 contains 135 lives, while MS Egerton 1993 has only 80 lives, a large proportion of which are of English or British saints, along with sections on the history of the world from Creation to the Crucifixion. These two manuscripts have not been much studied, so further work is needed on them to shed light on their potential ownership.

Although we are, as yet, unable to positively associate any of these three manuscripts with a female monastic house, the inclusion of the extra three or four female saints is highly suggestive of a female audience. Female saints lives were considered by male authorities to be especially suitable reading for women, as can be seen in Goscelin’s editing of the Legend of Saint Edith for Archbishop Lanfranc.39 The relics of Æthelthryth and Mildrith were housed in male communities, which had extensive records and numerous lives of both of their saints, not needing such basic information as can be found in the South English Legendary. While a male monastic house might request the life of a particular female saint for whom they had respect, the inclusion of three such lives points to an interest in female sanctity. To speculate that this request may have come from a female monastic community or three is, thus, not too great a stretch. On the other hand, saints Æthelthryth, Eadburh, Mildrith and Frideswide were commonly included in calendars in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and so there would have been an audience for their lives among lay communities as well.

Conclusion

While the collections of Anglo-Saxon female saints’ lives, such as the South English Legendary, written after the thirteenth century, were not written with the deliberate intention of producing a sense of Englishness, the works do display an increasing awareness of English identity, and a growing interest in collections of English saints. They are the results of an underlying sense of pride in Englishness.40 The same indicators of national consciousness are found in female saints’ lives as those found in the male lives. There is an emphasis on the historicity of the saints, the recording of their dates and their relationships to various royal families. The continued presence of the saints is also documented, describing both the places where the saints have been, the wells and trees which are the direct result of saints’ miracles, and the sites where the saints now rest.

36 Görlac, Textual Tradition, p.48.
38 Doyle, p. 15.
39 Michael Wright and Kathleen Loncar (eds), ‘The Vita of Edith’ in Stephanie Hollis (ed.), Writing the Wilton Women, p.35. See, especially, n.50.
What emerges from the study of the Anglo-Saxon female saints in the South English Legendary, then, is the range of ways in which women could be involved in the dissemination of a sense of Englishness. Not only are Anglo-Saxon women considered suitable subjects of saints’ lives, but English women are requesting collections of female saints and of English saints, becoming engaged in the process of rewriting of saints in English, and thus serving to further generate a sense of national consciousness. As it is probable that the collections which include a greater range of female saints were compiled for and read by women, it follows that religious and lay women were as aware of their national heritage and as interested in local tales as are their male counterparts. Thus, to bring balance to the study of the development of ideas of Englishness, greater attention needs to be paid to what women read. While David Bell’s What Nuns Read is a valuable resource for indicating what texts were found in the libraries of nunneries, it is limited by physical evidence of book-lists and library marks.41 There are many more books which could perhaps be added to the list of women’s reading. While the focus of this paper has been on religious texts, similar arguments can be applied to the Middle English romances, and even possibly the chronicles.