# Letters from a Prioress

7.4.2 - Original Composition in the Style of a pre-1650 Work

*13th century Prioress Juliana is a fictional character but her Benedictine monastery of Wherwell is quite real. Abbess Euphemia is also an historical character. A noblewoman, she was the Abbess of the well-off English Abbey for forty years.*

*Prioress Juliana was a knight’s daughter with four sisters born before her. She had no objections to entering Orders when her marriage prospects proved less than inspiring. At 18 she became a novice at Wherwell. She was voted as subprioress and then Prioress. Juliana is 45 years old and in good health. She is devout, knows the Bible well, and enjoys the occasional gossip.*

*The below set of letters span 1252-1257. I list them by topic rather than chronologically, although the last two letters end Juliana’s story in 1257 with the death of Abbess Euphemia.*

## Faith and Devotion

### To fellow nun Dame[[1]](#endnote-1) Brigida (public). Year: 1253

Unto my good cousin and sister in the Lord, Dame Brigida, who for her love of the Lord and great store of godly wisdom is closer than even a sister in my heart.

It is my good hope in our Lord Jesus Christ that my humble consolation will not seem proud in your eyes, for if it were to do so I should feel all the pangs of Purgatory in my heart and body. Only in God do I have the little courage and have to write to one so wise and to share with her my humble words, not that you yourself stand in need of them good lady, but perhaps your monastery might. For even those blessed who dwell in the light of Christ might receive good benefit from Our Lord’s very words. The days may be evil but the Lord is good.

St. Luke reminds us that when the women sought to honor the body of Christ and entered the tomb, the angels said “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!” And St. Paul prays “God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our sins.” Dear lady, we look toward the future, yearning for the day when we will be utterly raised into the glory of God's kingdom. Yet even now if we freely confess our sins he forgives us our sins, and we are risen with Christ.

Moreover, Jesus went out walking on the lake and the disciples were terrified for they thought he was a *rephaim* risen from Sheol, yet he encouraged them and assured them that he was no ghost but their Savior and to take courage, and even when Peter would have sunk beneath the waves Christ reached out his hand to save a doubter. Arise O Lord and walk upon the water, and if we should doubt and sink under the waves then of your grace reach to save us.

Even when all is lost, as it was for Israel when they sinned in war and the Ark of the Covenant fell into the hands of the enemy, even then God is not slow to save his people. The Ark was taken in triumph to many Philistine cities and the people were punished with a plague of rats and with boils, and when the Philistines moved the Ark to their great temple so that their god Dagon might do battle with the Lord of Hosts, the next morning the idol was toppled from its base and shattered in pieces before the Ark of God. Arise Lord and throw down the evils that surround us as you did before Your Ark in the temple of the enemy.

There is nothing that the prayers of God’s holy people cannot achieve, for if I were to list all of the prayers of the Lady and the saints that Our Lord has mightily answered, I should have no more paper nor ink to write, and my tongue would shrivel in my mouth. Therefore let that peace that surpasses all understanding guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. May God keep you well.

To Abbess Euphemia (Public). Year: 1252

My lady Abbess, you made a request of me that to you was small and to me was great, for I am but a poor woman and no scholar, and hardly dare to write this letter. Yet I take courage because God told Joshua to be strong and of good courage when he set out to conquer Canaan, so I will also attempt to be of good courage when I relay miraculous stories of blessed sisters who have served God greatly, bearing his signs in both heart and body. My poor letter is thus written, surely not from any lowly skill in writing that I may possess, but rather from the grace of our Lord to send such miracles upon us that we may scarcely receive them.

I have heard a tale of wonder and the grace of God wherein Dame Clare of Montefalco died after many years of good works and prayer, and that she had fervently prayed that God might ascribe the Holy Cross of Christ on her very heart. After Clare died her nuns caused her body to be opened and the heart examined, and there they witnessed not only the Holy Cross as if it were stamped on her heart, but also Christ’s crown of thorns, the scourge that whipped His holy back, the three nails to remind us of the iron that pierced His skin, the spear that opened His side down which blood and water flowed, and the sponge that dripped the sour wine held to His parched lips And not only this, but they all witnessed three globules that represented the Holy Trinity on her gall bladder.[[2]](#endnote-2)

I also heard the wondrous tale of Dame Christina who is also called the Mirabilis of St. Trond in Belgium.[[3]](#endnote-3) She looked to her sisters as if she had died, and indeed they prepared her body for burial and placed her open coffin in the church at her funeral Mass. The sisters were singing the Agnus Dei when Christina gave a great gasp and leapt out of the coffin, and shrieked that she had died and witnessed the horrors of hell and purgatory and had also seen the delights of heaven. She told the many witnesses gathered there that she had been given the choice of staying in heaven or returning to earth so that she might portray in her own body the horror of Purgatory, and she answered that she would rather return to earth and suffer all her life long in the hope that sinners see her example and repent.

To accomplish this her purpose became holy martyrdom, and she climbed trees and perched on church roofs to remove herself from the stench of human sin, which she could not thereafter abide. She witnessed to the terrors of purgatory by creeping into the kitchens of the monastery and crawling into lighted ovens from which her fellow sisters strove to extricate her, she leapt into boiling water, and submerged herself into icy waters of the Meuse for many days. The sisters also reported that when she contemplated the divine in ecstasy, which was often, she rolled up like a hedgehog and upon the conclusion of her contemplation, her limbs would slowly unroll.

Yet from none of these tortures did she take harm, not even from the fire or when she was carried downhill by the river and became intertwined with a mill wheel in a sight that is said was terrible to behold, or when packs of dogs pursued and bit her. In each of these martyrdoms she suffered terribly in her own body, but even so her body took no harm so that in her suffering she could display to many how terrible Purgatory would be, and how blessed was Heaven to those who confessed their sins and strove to sin no more.

It is my prayer that our sisters will receive good hope and blessing by reading of God’s blessed marks on the lives and the bodies of the saints of God. Hail Abbess Euphemia, ten times most beloved, indeed a hundred and a thousand.

### To Abbess Euphemia (public). Year:1254

It is my humble hope that this poor letter, while sparse in wisdom, nevertheless be so pitied by you that you will accept it in the kindliness of heart that you have always displayed to me and to all the sisters. Indeed my office and myself are far lowlier than you, beloved mother, yet even so my position encourages me, the affection that we share between us inspires me, and the love of Christ compels me, to offer you a vision that God visited upon me during Compline of a week past.

I entered into ecstasy and into my sight came my guardian angel who beckoned me to follow, and I did so with a good will. When I saw where he had led me my sight dimmed and I fain would have fainted, for I saw a place full of smoke and choking mists and fires where souls in torment were praying to God to be released from Purgatory and translated into the joys of Heaven, where there is surcease from pain forevermore. I saw too that my guardian angel and I were standing in the midst of those same flames that burned the suffering souls, but neither the angel or I were burned. I came closer to the suffering and asked how I could aid them but they did not answer, so I asked what was their greatest suffering, for each soul cried out more for God than cried out in pain at the flames. Each one told me that their torment was not the flames but their longing for God, and it is this longing that is the great gulf between Hell and Purgatory, for in Hell the lost souls care only for their suffering and nothing for God, as was the case when they were still living. The souls in Purgatory did not deny God in life but let themselves be tempted by sinful desires, greed, lust, pride, envy, sloth, and more, but through the great grace of God they may atone for their sins in Purgatory, where they are refined like gold and silver.

Yet I suffered to see their terrible suffering, as indeed our Lord must also, for He suffered and died to save us. How glad then I was to see Our Lady deigning to descend from heaven and visit the poor suffering souls in Purgatory, for she brought them holy water that the souls could drink and bear the flames more easily, and that increased their devotion to God. I heard them call her the Star of the Sea and I too would have stayed and worshipped even in that terrible place, but my guardian angels signed to me that we must leave, and that I was given this vision in order to warn all who might open their eyes to fires and not to glory.

Farewell beloved Lady Abbess, you and all the saints, and the humble handmaids of the Lord whom you do so well serve, and in turn seek to serve you in all humility, love, and chastity.[[4]](#endnote-4)

## Monastery Scandals

### To Bishop Aymer (public). Year: 1252

To the venerable Aymer de Valence**,** Bishop of Winchester, learned in doctrine and crowned with a wreath of chastity, **[[5]](#endnote-5)** Juliana, humble servant of the servants of God, by God’s good grace serving as Prioress, sends greetings in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lady Abbess Euphemia would have written you in her own hand were she able, but she has been ill, not to death God be praised, but she did not wish for this matter to wait as we must throw ourselves upon your mercy, as dutiful daughters unto a beloved father. I am reluctant to disturb your pontifical excellency with such small troubles of our monastery yet what is small to the great such as yourself looms large to the humble.

Some five miles away from Wherwell stands the Priory of Wintney. All of our sisters follow the Rule of blessed St. Benedict, yet since Wintney was founded they followed the Cistercian way. Nevertheless we have kept the peace all these years, guided in the way of peace by our Lord Christ and by the holy Bishops of Winchester, who hold authority over both our houses, even though we believe that the Cistercians have not kept to their own Rule as they should.

Now was the new Prioress of Wintney installed but a few months ago, and she is a noble lady which is no sin but a blessing of God. Yet she has not left the privileges of a noble house behind her, for she has brought with her a score of ill-mannered guards.[[6]](#endnote-6) A Prioress should bless others and obey God with the goodness and soberness of her conversation and life, and not house all nature of ruffians at the Priory of which she is its head.[[7]](#endnote-7) And I myself have personally witnessed the Prioress’s men steal the fruit from an orchard and threatened the passersby who would charge them to stop.

Even God’s handmaids of Wherwell, who are Your Excellency’s own poor daughters in the faith, cannot avoid crossing closely by their lands when we travel to market. Before the coming of this young Prioress, sisters from both houses would nod courteously one to another and pray that each other be blessed. Now we fear that the Prioress’s retainers will cast insults upon our heads and perhaps even worse.

I beg Your Excellency upon my knees that you might deign to send help and order the Prioress to practice such diligence over the behavior of her men such that their behavior become more like unto lambs than lions. May you show unto your supplicants what I know to be your great wisdom, mercy, and grace, even as did our Lord Jesus Christ. Farewell.

### To cousin and fellow nun Dame Edith (private). Year: 1253

To my most cherished and beloved sister, with sincere affection of charity unto all, to the blessed Edith does humble Juliana, serving with the unworthy name of prioress, give greetings in the Lord.[[8]](#endnote-8)

I have heard to my sorrow that in some monasteries, praise be to Our Lord none of ours who model ourselves after the Rule of blessed St. Benedict, there are scandals aplenty. This is particularly true if the monastery is in France, for many of us know how widely stretch the sins of the flesh in Rouen and Lyon. I even heard a horrible tale that a nun in Rouen who was named Jacqueline was made pregnant by a chaplain and they were willing lovers to their shame. They were found out and both of them suffered greatly as they well deserved, and the chaplain died of his miserable treatment at the hands of Jacqueline’s sisters. Yet by the mercy of God, after imprisonment and long penance, Jacqueline received the forgiveness of God and her sisters, and she was released to live a long life of charity and good deeds. I have even heard that she was later made an Abbess although I am not certain if that were true.

However, even though all sins are the same sin in the eyes of God, certain venial sins do perhaps not require great penance. I heard tale that Archbishop Eudes wrote a letter to a monastery in Rouen that condemned the sisters for the keeping of small dogs, birds, and squirrels. I have no great quarrel with the keeping of small dogs or cats for they are good mousers, as long as their masters do not love them too well, and so not separate themselves as they should from the cares and loves of the world.

Indeed, did not Anchoress Eleanor keep her own cat? She was a noble lady and well regarded as a spiritual counselor to many, and was allowed to keep her cat with her in her anchorhold. The little beast disappeared for a week and was roundly regarded as dead, only to appear in my cell, sitting on my mattress as if a faithful nun in choir, straight and valiant. I returned the cat to the anchoress and great were her praises to God, and although she made me her apology for being so glad that a mere animal had returned to her, I assured her that God knows when a sparrow falls, and surely, he also knows the anchoress’s cat.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Dearest sister, we give you deepest thanks for all the good you have done for me, in spiritual and in temporal matters. I thank you a thousand times, in Jesus' name.

### To Dame Edith (private). Year: 1255

To my dearest beloved sister Dame Edith, most dear to me in Christ and bound to me by ties of kinship, I, Juliana, wish enduring health and prosperity. His Excellency Bishop Aymer came to our monastery to tell us that His Holiness had ordered the holy sisters enclosed, the sentence of excommunication to be carried out if any nun or sister should go outside the bounds of the monastery. Loathe as I am to say ill of our blessed Bishop, you have surely heard that His Excellency does not perhaps display that pure charity and chastity that his humble flock would beg him to model unto us, as did our Holy Shepherd unto the disciples.

I have some reason to believe that the lady Abbess Euphemia may share some of these same misgivings, and although our Lady has fully withdrawn from the cares and love of the world, the Lady’s noble family has ever protested His Excellency’s appointment to the bishop’s seat of Winchester, and indeed they never let anyone forget that the good Bishop has never been consecrated.

This may perhaps explain the lady Abbess’s rage as she held the statue of decree in her hands, which were shaking as with the ague, yet not because of illness but because of her holy anger and the blood of conquerors running through her noble veins. Abbess Euphemia did not wait for His Excellency to turn away so would not see, but she threw the document full at his chest, and it roundly struck him. The lady Abbess bade His Excellency to witness that she was not content in any way to observe such a statute, that as the Abbess of a great house she was bound to travel and travel often for the sake of her responsibilities, and so were the sisters who lived and traveled at her order, and that he may be assured that as the paper lay crumpled upon the ground, so it bore silent witness to her regard for it.[[10]](#endnote-10)

I fear that I have made many penances for my laughter, but later on I became afraid of what His Holiness would say to us, for is he not the Vicar of Christ and we have denied him? Abbess Euphemia taught me that Jesus and His disciples moved many times and traveled hither and yon, and sometimes women traveled with them, and should Christ’s own handmaids do less in His holy service? Therefore, I was comforted, most especially when she added that these dire threats of excommunication are but smoke and air, and that although she holds His Holiness in the highest regard, yet she does not expect His Holiness, as steeped as he is in the world of divine thought and spiritual ecstasy, to understand the necessity of travel of the Abbess of a great house in England, which is not Rome.

And you are able, write to me of your receipt of this letter, for it may be that I have committed to words that which I should not, but I have full faith in your discretion and that of our messenger, and to that end this letter bears my own seal. Blessings be on you dear sister, kinswoman, and true friend.

## Heresies[[11]](#endnote-11) and Strange Stories

### To Dame Brigida (public). Year: 1256

Hail.  Ten times most beloved, indeed a hundred and a thousand, may God keep you well my own well beloved.

You made a request of me to aid your younger charges with understanding the wicked heresy of the Poor Men of Lyon, who we also call the *Vaudois*. In this I do not wish the younger sisters and novices to be ignorant, for if they were to follow the Poor Men’s ways and break with the very Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, then they are lost, lost forever. Fain would I take on their torment in Hell lest they should suffer but for one moment. Yet such would not be allowed me, and if I could but bathe their fevered brow in Hell I would do so, yet such would not be allowed me. So I pray and plead with my fellow sisters, beloved in Christ, and in all humility, to listen to me and not to the sons of perdition.

They say that the true Church, the “Romish” Church as they name it to my sorrow and horror, is not the Church of Jesus Christ, but a church of wicked sinners who were led into error under His Holiness Pope Sylvester, who accepted a donation of great treasure from Emperor Constantine[[12]](#endnote-12). We know that in this, the earthly kingdoms bowed the knee to the heavenly kingdoms. “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”

Yet the Poor Men of Lyon, and that the town they claim is Lyon I am scarcely surprised, for what good comes from France? I do not include good King William in my charge for although Frenchmen fought in his vanguard, he himself and his bravest soldiers came from Normandy. Yet these Poor Men of Lyon say that when Pope Sylvester accepted the earthly treasure, His Holiness plunged the Church into apostasy with the emperors of Rome, and so it remains to this day, corrupted in the world and doomed in the world to come, for they say that the Church of Rome is the Harlot of the Apocalypse.

Furthermore, they say that the Pope is the head of the beast and the fountainhead of all errors in faith and practice, the princes of the Church are murderers because of the Holy Crusades, and the monks are Pharisees, even those “whitened sepulchers” as Jesus said of the true Pharisees. They even say that it is an evil thing and a false worship of Mammon to found and endow churches and monasteries, so that we all should be turned out in nothing but our shifts upon the King’s Road.

They also condemn the sacraments, for to them the Catechism is naught, the baptism of infants has no profit, the sacrament of Unction is useless for the poor since they do not receive it, and even the sacrament of Marriage is useless since they believe that bearing offspring must be the husband’s and wife’s sole justification for marriage. Not even the tonsure of our monks passes their censure for they do not believe that religious are to be set apart from common laymen. Indeed, they say that the Apostles themselves were but laymen, as if Peter himself were not handed the keys to the Kingdom of God, and all of the authority of Jesus Christ.

There is much more at which they transgress and yet they still fool poor Christians who are not so knowledgeable in their faith as they ought to be. The humble laborer will not know as much as our learned Doctors of the faith, but they should know enough of Lord Christ and His Church to send away these Poor Men of Lyon, and to smell the stink of fire upon them. “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”

I, Juliana, the servant and friend of your soul, beg that your young sisters and novices who are being tempted to the error that leads to eternal death, take note with what rude sayings the Poor Men accomplish their wicked purpose. I offer my words to you, beloved sister, with holy fear and love that are proper for the sacrifice of prayer, and my pledge of loyalty to you in God and to remember you always in my prayers.

## The Passing of an Era

### To Bishop Aymer (public). Year: 1257

Unto His Excellency Bishop Aymer does Prioress Juliana send greetings of eternal safety in the Lord.

We carried out Your Excellency’s order to travel from Wherwell Abbey to Merton where King Henry was graciously visiting for a week during His Majesty’s travels, and where we presented the proper fines to His Majesty for the custody of the Abbey during the vacancy to be caused by the coming resignation [death] of the lady Abbess Euphemia. That the Abbess will soon be leaving us for the courts of heaven we can scarcely comprehend, and our tears and our cries go up day and night. But even Saint Paul said to the church at Philippi, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.” We know that after her long labor in Christ’s service, it is far better that our lady Abbess be given leave to depart and, for her sins are few if any, to immediately come before the Throne of God, there to be judged “a good and faithful servant.”

At Merton, we were warmly welcomed and fed and housed, and were nearly overcome by the presence of His Majesty, who graciously accepted with his own hand the amount of fifty marks of silver from my own unworthy hand. I had been anxious that the gift would be too humble to give to a King, but was comforted when I discovered that he will use the fifty marks to buy a commensurate amount of five marks of gold. And so our fine, which we humbly offered up to His Majesty, took their proper place besides the one mark in gold paid by the sheriffs of Surrey and Hereford.[[13]](#endnote-13)  “The last shall be first, and the first last.”

May divine grace deign to protect Your Excellency as we crave your prayers.

### To Dame Edith (private). Year: 1257

To the well-beloved Edith, greetings from the humblest of her sisters who holds most strongly to the holy bonds of kinship and love.

On the 6th of May, in the year of grace, 1257, died our blessed mother lady Abbess Euphemia,[[14]](#endnote-14) who is most worthy of remembrance in our love and affection and true fellowship. I was granted great honor, far from any deserving or natural gift, by being allowed to serve as prioress for the lady Abbess, whose sole purpose was to serve the glory of God by serving his humble handmaids. When I entered the monastery, there were forty sisters and at this time of her passing, there are full eighty. She bade me see to it that every nun received the necessaries of life and she also increased the sum allowed for yearly garments, and she also caused many new buildings to be constructed for the good health and continual service and gratitude to God for our monastery.

I remember when the Abbess and the sisters were in the church and the Bishop was also in attendance, sitting in honor as is proper in the presbytery.[[15]](#endnote-15) As Father Bayard preached, we all heard strange groanings in the presbytery, and His Excellency requested the Father to quickly bring his homily to a close, not meaning any disrespect to the Lord of whom Father Bayard preached, but in fear that the roof would fall down around our heads, or perhaps specifically His Excellency’s head, for he sat directly beneath the site of the building’s distress.

When we had all gone safely out of the chapel, the Abbess requested and received monies from His Excellency, despite the incident that had occurred some years before when he attempted to enforce the order to enclose the Abbey. The Abbess received not only sufficient monies to rebuild the chapel, but to sink the foundations many feet down into the ground, for the ground beneath was soft from flooding and had skewed and weakened the building above it. Praise be to our Lord Christ that he saved us. The lady Abbess also received monies to build a farmery[[16]](#endnote-16) far from the main buildings, and with it many other fair buildings.

Even as Christ is the foundation of the Church, so was Abbess Euphemia in Christ the foundation of our Abbey, and the fine buildings that rose from her wisdom, industry, and thrift shall stand witness for many more years than will her friends and daughters remain on earth to share our testimony.

I know that this letter will grieve you fully as much as attending upon our blessed lady Abbess at her passing has grieved me. I am certain that she has gone to heaven without suffering even one moment in Purgatory, for I have never known another who has so devoted her life to the love and glory of God, and to her service to his handmaids and to the poor and humble on earth. It is most suitable that we should forever perpetuate her memory in our special prayers and remembrances, for she is one of the greatest ladies yet most humble, like unto the virtuous wife of Proverbs, yet the Abbess served the Lord for He was her husband. So ends the long and blessed life of Abbess Euphemia and now she dwells in the realms of light forever.

May the exceeding generosity of your love and faith grow even greater in Christ, and may he comfort the grief in our hearts with his assurance and the hope of heaven. Farewell.

# Documentation

My fictional letter writer is a Prioress in historical Wherwell Abbey under the real Abbess Euphemia*.* A monastery with less than a dozen consecrated nuns would be a Priory, and more would be an Abbey. Prioresses served as the heads of Priories, and in Abbeys the Prioress was second-in-command to the Abbess.

Both Abbesses and Prioresses were likely to be nobly or gently born. These women usually brought money with them in the form of dowries or endowments, and many of them had ongoing access to their male relatives’ purse strings. For example, Joan Wiggenhall (“Wygenale”) was Prioress of Crabhouse Priory. She rebuilt ramshackle buildings by the “grace of oure Lord God an be the helpe of Edmund Perys, Person of Watlington," her cousin. When the corn crop failed one year, another cousin, Master Jon Wygenale, sent generous supplies of corn and barley along with a sum of marks. [Power p.43]

My Prioress would have been elected from the ranks of the nuns in Wherwell. Monastery office elections had to be approved by the local Bishop. In practice, the Bishop usually approved the nun’s choices since the monasteries ran more smoothly under a popularly elected leader of their own. Sometimes the elections were genteel and unanimous affairs, but not always – the rank of prioress in a larger abbey was an attractive one, and some elections rivaled the recent American presidential election in sheer drama. In 16th century Elstron Abbey in Lincoln, the prioress election was a hotbed of behind-the-scenes lobbying, backroom deals, removing an elected leader, substituting an unpopular one, angry letters to the bishop, an episcopal investigation, and a walk-out.

## Nuns and Letter Writing

In 12th century Europe, formal letter writing developed as ars dictaminis: the art of letter-writing. This type of letter was a sub-field of prose writing in general, and medieval rhetoric in specific. The letters were invariably written in excellent Latin, and combined persuasive passages with highly educated literary and religious references. “Indeed, letters in the Middle Ages often were read aloud to a community or circulated publicly. They served as legal documents as well as means of personal communication. As Giles Constable notes in his introduction to the genre, ‘in the Middle Ages letters were for the most part self-conscious, quasi-public literary documents, often written with an eye to future collection and publication.’” (Cherewatuk 4)

It was rare even for literate women to write in this style although some did so: 12th century nun Hildegard of Bingen was famous for it. (She still took care to apologize for her “rustic” style.) The author Christine de Pizan mastered the form, using it in works like Livre des Trois Vertus (better known today as The Treasure of the City of Ladies). Christine also used the literary letter-writing model in her Epistre a la Reine to Queen of France Isabeau de Bavière.

When an Abbess or Prioress needed to write a “public” letter for sharing – which was written in Latin – some wrote it themselves, while others dictated it in their own language to a male scribe, who would translate it into scholarly Latin and add proper salutations and closings. An example of the latter writer is Catherine of Siena, who dictated much of her public writing in Italian to a scribe for Latin translation.

Salutations and closings were particularly important. Male scholars mostly practiced this element of literary letter writing, and male scribes would have known to add the proper wording to an important letter. Women letter writers honored the recipient in their salutations and closings, but usually not to the extent of the scholarly letter form. “Letter writing was a literary convention, and given their sharing were often political ones. Since women were excluded from the schools at which the ars dictaminis was taught, it is not surprising that most authors follow the models in only a rudimentary way, primarily in salutations and closings.” (Cherewatuk 6)

Not all letters were so formal. People generally wrote personal letters to family and friends in the vernacular. Although these letters seem to be highly formal to modern readers, they are informal compared to the public shared letters of the time.

I wrote my letters to reflect both private and public forms. Prioress Juliana would have written her private letters in Anglo-French. And although she was educated in reading Latin, she preferred to dictate important public letters to a scribe for translation into Latin.

## Letter Structure

Most of the letters that I consulted were originally written in Latin or Anglo-French. I do not know either language, let alone the many differences between Classical Latin and Medieval Latin, and the distinctions between Medieval Latin that rose from the writer’s native language.

I used the excellent site *Epistolæ* for the original Latin and English translation of representative letters. I was concerned that the long and complicated translated sentences were a Victorian-ish take on the original Latin, but it appears not – one of the strictures of scholarly letter writing was long and involved sentences, which displayed the letter writer’s grasp of rhetoric and Latin. Here is an example of an original single sentence in Latin in an 8th century letter from Abbess Elfed of Whitby to Abbess Adolana of Pfalzel.

*Quapropter precibus subnixis suppliciter poscimus, ut sacrosanctis flammigerisque oraculis vestris nos apud almipotentem Dominum defendere dignemini; siquidem vobis vicem reddere nostra humilitas minime pigebit, apostolo Iacobo hoc ipsum precipiente ac dicente: “Orate pro invicem, ut salvemini.”*

The English translation: “That is why we ask as suppliant that you deign to defend us with the almighty lord by your sacred and flaming oracles; indeed, our humility will annoy you less in this exchange since the apostle James orders and says: ‘Pray for each other, that you may be saved.’"

In a later example from the late 12th century, Bernard of Clairvaux writes to Melisende of Jerusalem. His style is not quite as complex as Elfed’s but still demonstrates longer sentences and strung-together phrases.

*Scribite nobis frequentius, quia et vobis non oberit, et nobis proderit, si esse vestrum et bona studia plenius certiusque noverimus.*

Translation: “Write to us frequently, since it will do you no harm and it will do us good, if we know good about you fully and certainly.”

I chose to use the educated style of a woman who read and write in Latin, but was not a literary scholar. All the events that Juliana described had their roots in historical events – even the outrageous ones. Medieval nuns were not the gentle, submissive creatures that we might picture today. (Any more than modern nuns are gentle or submissive.) They fought passionately for themselves and their way of life, sometimes physically but most often through the art of the letter. Perhaps the pen truly is mightier than the sword.

## Works Cited

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## Endnotes

1. The use of “Sister” is acceptable but “Dame” tended to be used more often in English monasteries. Although any nun past the novice stage might use Dame, contemporary writings usually employed it as a title for more senior nuns. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Miracle regarding St. Clare of Montefalco in 1308. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 12th century nun Catherine Mirabilous (“of Miracles”) was considered a saint shortly after her death, and appeared in a Calendar of Saints by 1630. Prioress Juliana’s breathless narrative came from reading the account of Christina’s life by Thomas of Cantimpré: V*ita Christinae virginis mirabilis dictae.* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Inspired by a journal account of nun St. Faustina. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Aymer de Valence served as Bishop of Winchester from 1250-1260. In fact he was neither a good bishop nor a good man; he received the appointment because he was a half-brother of Henry III. He was roundly unpopular in England and in fact was never consecrated as bishop. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Both Wherwell Abbey and Wintney Priory in the County of Hampshire are real. Wherwell was a Benedictine Abbey and Wintney a Cisterician priory, both under the authority of the diocese of Winchester. However, the events of the letter did not actually happen in England. Similar events occurred in the 9th century when the Carolingian Princess Bertha was appointed Abbess at Avenay. She and the nearby monastery of Altvillar were bitter enemies who accused each other of fielding private armies. There were loud complaints on both sides to the bishop. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Both Juliana and the Cistercian sister are prioresses. The difference is that Wintney is a Priory and the new lady is its head, while Juliana serves as Prioress at an Abbey and Abbess Euphemia is its head. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Both ladies are fictional nuns and biological cousins. In fact Juliana is being slightly naughty at writing her own cousin Edith, since an important stricture in the monastery was leaving the world and its relationships, and Edith was in a different monastery. In practice in the 13th century, it was not at all unusual for nobly born abbesses, prioresses, and even anchorites to entertain guests and write to friends and relatives. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This sounds fanciful but cats were generally allowed in religious houses thanks to their talent as mousers. The same holds true for the more-or-less solitary anchoresses (many had visitors). The *Ancrene Riwle*, a rule for anchoresses, stated: “Unless need compels you, my dear sisters, and your director advises it, you must not keep any animal except a cat… Now if someone needs to keep one, let her see to it that it does not annoy anyone or do harm to anybody, and that her thoughts are not taken up with it. An anchoress ought not to have anything that draws her heart outward.” [as translated in Power, p. 43]. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This event actually occurred in 1300 AD at Markyate monastery in England. Pope Boniface VIII was alarmed at reports that nuns were commonly traveling, boarding non-religious, keeping servants and pets, and taking pilgrimages. In fact many nuns were; but the nobly born abbesses were not about to accept enclosure. Not until the 15th century did the church’s male hierarchy succeed in enclosing most convent. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In 1215, the Church condemned the Waldensian movement as heretical. The doctrine first appeared in the late 12th century in Lyon, France. Ironically enough, the12th century cult’s beliefs were very similar to the beliefs of the coming Reformation. Some Waldensian churches still worship today. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Although both the Church and the Waldensians believed in Constantine’s Donation of great treasure to the Church, it is very unlikely that it happened. Its first mention is in an 8th century missive of doubtful veracity. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The visit of Henry III to Merton happened, as did the giving of a gold apiece from the Sheriffs and 50 marks in silver from Wherwell’s actual Prioress and the senior nuns who accompanied her. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This is the date of Abbess Euphemia’s passing. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In medieval churches, the presbytery was the generous space between the high altar and the choir stalls. Visiting churchmen of rank would sit there during the services. The story about the presbytery’s “groanings” and its rebuilding are true. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Farm buildings, farmstead. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)