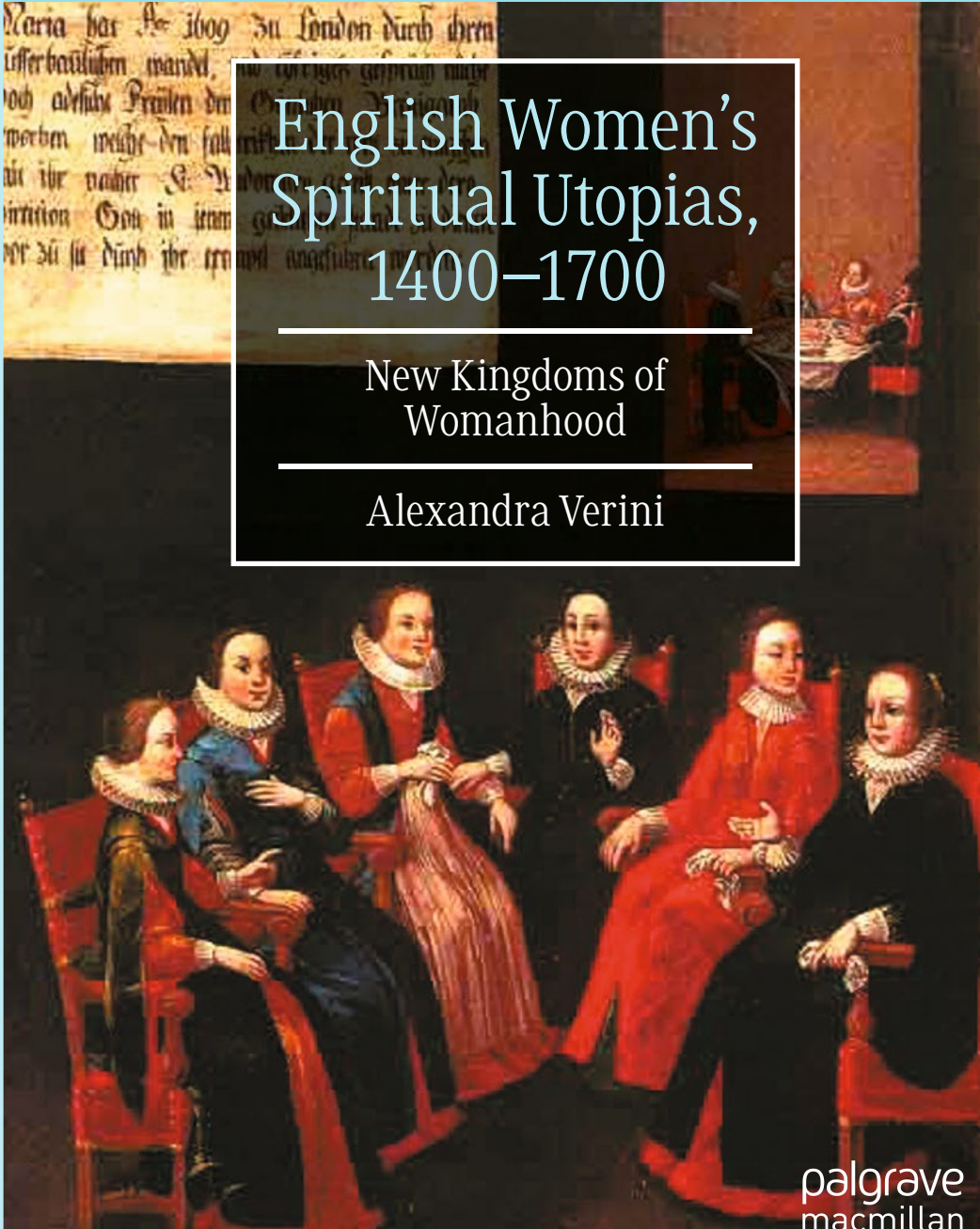




THE NEW MIDDLE AGES



English Women's Spiritual Utopias, 1400–1700

New Kingdoms of
Womanhood

Alexandra Verini

palgrave
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The New Middle Ages

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ISSN 2945-5936

ISSN 2945-5944 (electronic)

The New Middle Ages

ISBN 978-3-031-00916-7

ISBN 978-3-031-00917-4 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-00917-4>

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the product of nearly ten years of thinking, reading, writing, and talking. There are, therefore, many people to thank. My dissertation advisors at UCLA, Chris Chism and Lowell Gallagher, along with my committee members Sarah Kareem, Eleanor Kaufman, and Charlene Villaseñor Black, provided invaluable support as I worked on the ideas that would turn into this book. I especially want to thank Chris for our many discussions about medieval friendship and for her careful reading and revision of my prose. I want to thank Lowell for suggesting much of the critical theory that undergirds this book and for introducing me to Mary Ward, who remains central to my understanding of spiritual utopia.

During my time at UCLA, my research was supported by the Dickson Fellowship from the Art History Department and by grants from the English Department, which enabled me to conduct essential archival research. For the opportunity to conduct this research, I am also deeply indebted to archivists at Exeter University, particularly Annie Price, for their hospitality and permission to read manuscripts from Syon Abbey. I would equally like to thank the archivists at Arundel Castle for welcoming me during my visit to view the Syon manuscript and for giving me permission to reproduce some images from this manuscript. I am grateful to the sisters of the Congregatio Jesu in Augsburg for their generosity in allowing me to view Mary Ward's *Painted Life* and their permission to reproduce images from the *Painted Life*.

The final shaping of this book was completed during the first year of the pandemic. I want to thank Clara Feldmanstern, my best friend of 20 years, for phone calls that lifted my spirits during that time and for her

painstaking copy editing. My dear friends “at the end of the mind,” Nick Morgan and Peter Murray, helped me stay sane with daily WhatsApp messages and provided valuable feedback on sections of this book. Boyda Johnstone, my sister medievalist, has always cheered me on and offered vibrant intellectual companionship. Yashaswini Chanda’s intellectual generosity and humor not only saw me through the last two years of this project but also inspired me to think it might be possible to write again. My friends, Gillian Adler, Angelina del Balzo, and Crescent Rainwater were vital pillars of academic and emotional support for this project.

My colleagues in the junior faculty writing group at Ashoka have provided insightful feedback and encouragement. I especially want to thank Alex Phillips and Mali Skotheim for their comments on my revisions. Many thanks are also due to my department chair, Gil Harris, for his mentorship throughout my time at Ashoka. Appreciation goes to my research assistant Shatakshi Whorra, who has helped with numerous research and proofing aspects of this book. During these last two years of writing, Sarah Moran and Terry Prendergast have offered motivation and advice from the other side of the world. Deep gratitude is due to Allie Troyanos and Bonnie Wheeler for taking this book onboard and for overseeing a series that imagines a more expansive Middle Ages. I also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided me with insightful feedback on the manuscript.

My mother, who introduced me to the wonders of the Middle Ages, has been endlessly supportive of my eccentric academic journey. For this and much more, I am truly grateful. Finally, Aagman Baurly has been with me through the last stages of this book, cheering me on with early morning discussions about utopia and late-night episodes of *Poirot*. I give him all my love and thanks.

Praise for *English Women's Spiritual Utopias, 1400–1700*

“In *English Women's Spiritual Utopias, 1400–1700* Alexandra Verini brings feminist theory to the study of utopianism, charting a wholly new trajectory of utopian thought from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century. Her book boldly argues for a new archive of utopian texts, and she boldly argues for the centrality of women and gender thinking to the history of utopian thought. Her book alters not only the history of utopianism as it is currently conceived, but it charts exciting new directions for future study—directions that install a consideration of women and gender at their center.”

—Karma Lochrie, *Indiana University*

“*English Women's Spiritual Utopias, 1400–1700* deftly unites feminist, theological, material, and utopian theoretical approaches to the study of English women's lives and literature within and beyond medieval and early modern convents. Verini successfully argues for a ‘rhizomatic rather than linear genealogical’ approach to understanding convents as ‘space[s] of utopian possibility’ for their inhabitants, and clearly demonstrates how these institutions and their writing influenced secular women's writing and creation of all-female communities.”

—Victoria Van Hynning, *University of Maryland*

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ABBREVIATIONS

EETS	Early English Text Society. EETS volumes are designated as o.s. (original series), e.s. (extra series), or s.s. (supplementary series).
ELH	English Literary History
MED	Middle English Dictionary
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
SEL	Studies in English Literature

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Introduction: Cities of Women—A New History of Utopia

At the opening of Margaret Cavendish's (1623–1673) closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), the protagonist Lady Happy boldly declares:

I will take so many Noble Persons of my own Sex as my Estate will plentifully maintain, such whose Births are greater than their Fortunes, and are resolv'd to live a single life, and vow Virginitie. With these I mean to live incloister'd with all the delights and pleasures that are allowable and lawful; My Cloister shall not be a Cloister of restraint but a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them. (220)¹

Lady Happy here frames her cloister as a utopian retreat for women seeking to avoid the marriage market using pairs of synonyms—“single life”/“virginitie”; “delights”/“pleasures”; “allowable”/“lawful.” These pairings of near but not exact synonyms recall the clerical doublets of Christine de Pizan's utopian work *Le livre de la cité des dames* (1405), which Margaret Ferguson reads as introducing “conceptual alternatives” that create an “area of ambiguity” between two terms.² In Lady Happy's declaration, such doublets proliferate the infinite possibilities and pleasures to be found in the convent. At the same time, these pairings open up a space of productive ambiguity: Do we read the terms as describing one quality or two? Might a woman, for instance, lead a single life without being a virgin? Might some acts be allowable but not lawful? These linguistic alternatives signal the conceptual alternatives that convent life

could offer its inhabitants, since enclosure gave women access to possibilities outside patriarchal society. The beginning of *The Convent of Pleasure* thus presents a women's separatist utopia that challenges the status quo.

And yet, this utopia is also a precarious one. The uncertain future of this convent is conveyed in Lady Happy's subsequent pairing of antonyms. In the final sentence of her opening speech, she describes her convent not as a place of "restraint" but a site of "freedom" that will serve "not to vex the Senses but to please them." While this contrast between restraint and freedom emphasizes the liberation that Lady Happy's cloister will offer its inhabitants, it also raises the possibility that a cloister might restrain women and vex the senses. This prefacing of the convents' pleasures with their opposites wedges a note of discord into the ideal vision, suggesting how easily an idea might turn into its inverse, how easily it might fail. Indeed, the end of the play, as the cloister closes and Lady Happy abandons her single life to marry a prince (who came to the convent disguised as a princess), follows through on this possibility of failure. Lady Happy's description of her future cloister, therefore, previews both the potential of convent life to liberate women and the precarious nature of such a space.³ As this book will argue, both of these dimensions—abundant possibility and potential failure—were present in real-world medieval and early modern convents. These spaces generated a utopianism that was characterized by the desire for an uncertain future and that influenced the earliest women writers of fictional utopias.

Convents had an automatic link to utopia because they were the only spaces in the medieval and early modern world in which women mostly ruled themselves, offering unprecedented possibilities for female governance at a time when women were not afforded political power. While the Church's requirement that nuns be enclosed was delimiting, removal from the world also enabled many nuns in convents to operate outside gender norms, performing the kinds of conceptual alternatives, such as avoidance of marriage, that we find in Lady Happy's speech. While the women in these protected spaces were expected to conform to conventions of spiritual femininity, such as chastity, meekness, and obedience, in reality, they also often transgressed such norms and unsettled the expectation that women were to be subservient to men. In this way, cloistered communities operated as utopias within ideology: they resided within the patriarchal structure of the Church, but they could also evade patriarchy by offering women independent spiritual authority. As recent scholarship has shown, women in these enclosed spaces actively intervened in external

affairs, defying the traditional relegation of women to the private sphere. Lady Happy's image of the cloister as a space in which women exercised unusual forms of freedom was, therefore, not unique but rather continuous with the history of real-world convents.

This book draws on the etymological definition of utopia as a "good place that is nowhere," based on Thomas More's (1478–1535) neologism (formed from *ou* ["no"] and *topos* ["place"]) and punning on *eu* ["good"]), as well as on more recent theoretical understandings of utopia as a means of thinking otherwise. I find that medieval and early modern women's writings and visual culture emerging from and inspired by convents produced a parallel utopian way of thinking that, different from traditional views of utopia, attends to and reshapes the past. Such a notion of utopia is continuous with Renaissance fictional narratives of travel to unknown islands—like More's island Utopia, convents were set off from the world. However, these real-world women's communities also differed from the largely male-authored fictional utopias of their day: in their use of religious life as a vehicle for the contemplation of worldly futures, they deviated from utopia's conventional association with the secular and the modern. Moreover, because of their religious orientation, medieval and early modern women's religious communities and the fictions based on them were invested in reworking rather than jettisoning tradition and were also more directed toward the future than the static fictional worlds of their male contemporaries. Women's religious communities produced a form of thought that, in its assemblage of disparate traditions from the past that often work at cross purposes, embraced its own potential for failure while also reveling in the intersubjective possibilities of desire. By drawing from a textual and ideological heritage that actively discouraged female agency, religious women and the women authors who followed them mobilized a model of utopia that embraced contradiction and often held in balance competing desires rather than aspiring toward uniform perfection.

While convent communities across Europe might be read as utopian since they enabled women to defy patriarchal programs, after the Reformation, utopianism became vital for English Catholic women in particular. After Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, the English convents that gradually established themselves on the Continent served as repositories of nostalgia for Catholicism and as models of female political agency.⁴ Such spaces were not only oriented toward a future in heaven, as is often assumed of religious communities, but were also directed toward a worldly future since they sought to revive England's Catholic past. Given

this historical context, English convents and the English women's communities that emulated convent life, such as Little Gidding and Mary Ward's Society, became particularly rich sites of utopian thought and are the focus of this book. Following the removal of convents from English soil, early modern Protestant English women writers were apt to see the convent as "a good place that is nowhere" and drew on memories of the medieval convent to imagine their own utopias. In the sections of this introduction that follow, I situate this book's argument within trans-historical scholarly conversations surrounding utopia to demonstrate how pairing women's spiritual communities with utopia both sheds light on the aspirations of these communities and offers a broader understanding of utopia.

THE HISTORY OF UTOPIA

In arguing for the vital contributions of medieval and early modern women's spiritual communities to utopian thought, this book at once builds on and unsettles existing histories of utopia, which largely find their origins in More's *Utopia* and extend to other fictional texts that drew on the trope of a traveler who arrives in an ideal society. More's idea of utopia as a perfect but unlocatable place was, to some degree, a product of its time. During the English Renaissance, the power of the Church was receding, allowing writers the freedom to imagine an ideal place on earth rather than in heaven. At the same time, global explorations were stirring the imaginations of Europeans. Such circumstances doubtlessly influenced More's depictions of the well-governed island that is discovered by the fictional character Hythloday, who was, according to the narrative, part of Amerigo Vespucci's voyages to the New World. In the literary genre that More established, utopia is an ideal place removed from the real world that also contains a sense of paradox pointing to its impossibility. Literary histories of the utopia genre by Robert Applebaum, Amy Boesky, Chris Ferns, and Marina Leslie, as well as surveys of utopian writing like Frank and Fritzie Manuels' *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, tend to focus on the most canonical works of the early modern period and to see utopia as a relatively narrow genre, which consists of representations of seemingly perfect worlds that idealize organization.⁵

While More's *Utopia* was influenced by the cultural currents of the Renaissance, the idea of a good and unattainable place existed long before the sixteenth century in all parts of the globe. Imagined societies that improve upon the present-day world appear in works such as Plato's

Republic and Augustine's *The City of God*, in the Garden of Eden in *the Bible*, in Ravidas's *Begumpura*, and in the mythical Tibetan idea of Shambhala. Such classical and medieval examples of utopia do not contain the satire of More's *Utopia*, but they anticipate his sense of a place that corrects the flaws of the present-day world. As Karma Lochrie writes of medieval utopias such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and *Piers Plowman*, utopia, when understood in this broader sense, is a "heuristic device that opposes our habits of thinking and ideologies with the intimation of the possibility that things could be different."⁶ The present book's recovery of utopianism within women's religious communities is, therefore, continuous both with traditional understandings of utopia as an ideal fictional space that improves upon the outside world and with more expansive notions of a utopia that exists beyond the literary. My approach is distinctive, however, since I locate utopia within women's religious communities.

To further this more expansive sense of utopia, I draw on critical theories of utopia, particularly those of Ernst Bloch, Louis Marin, Ruth Levitas, Fredric Jameson, and José Esteban Muñoz, to define utopia as oriented toward a future—rather than as a blueprint for a perfect society or a specific literary genre—that defamiliarizes the present. Much of this more capacious thinking about utopia has been inspired by Bloch, a Marxist scholar who deviated from Marx and Engel's dismissal of utopianism and coined the term "utopian function" to characterize a desire for "future possibilities of being different and better," which is present in everything from literature to architecture and the circus.⁷ Turning away from exclusive associations of utopia with a literary genre or even with planned communities, Bloch includes practices like alchemy, art, and especially music within the purview of utopia. Limiting utopia to a literary genre is for him "like trying to reduce electricity to the amber from which it gets its Greek name and in which it was first noticed."⁸ In his writing on utopia, he frequently refers to the "not yet," by which he means a search or desire for something better. His utopianism resists the teleological closure of an apocalyptic or utopian ideal in favor of an unfinished, aspirational present. Following Bloch's work, utopia studies has become an expansive field, spanning the disciplines of literary studies, political theory, urban planning, and sociology. Such growth has led to increasingly nuanced and conceptual ideas of utopia that exceed the genre. The sociologist Levitas, for instance, sees utopia as defined by the desire for something different, while science fiction scholar Tom Moylan understands utopia as grounded in estrangement and defamiliarization of

values that we take for granted.⁹ For Muñoz, utopia consists of queer worldmaking that rejects the here and now and insists on the “potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”¹⁰ Such scholars understand utopia not as a product but as a process, a way of working toward a different world.

Medieval and early modern women’s spiritual utopias are aligned with these more recent theories that view utopia as the desire for a different future. Indeed, they radiate a sense of futurity that only appears in fictional utopias in the nineteenth century. The utopianism that emerges from within women’s spiritual communities, however, also differs from the commonplace association of utopia with newness; instead, early women’s utopian practices and visions often work within existing paradigms, reshaping rather than entirely rejecting the past to forge new futures. This understanding of utopia as a framework that challenges the status quo rather than as a specific place or genre allows me to locate utopian thought both in real-world women’s communities and in women’s fiction that might not obviously be categorized as utopian.

CONVENTS, WOMEN, AND UTOPIA

Despite many references to convents in women’s fictional utopias, from Cavendish’s *The Convent Pleasure* (1668) and Sarah Scott’s (1720–1795) *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762) to Toni Morrison’s (1931–2019) *Paradise* (1997), women’s religious communities have largely not been read as utopias. In fact, if anything, works like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* align women’s collective spiritual life with the dystopian oppression of women’s agency. If the modern view of the convent is one of repressed sexuality, many late medieval and early modern commentators labeled female monasteries as sites of debauchery and lasciviousness. The prioress from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400) shows signs of sexual promiscuity while the anonymous fifteenth-century satirical poem “Why Can’t I Be a Nun” portrays an imagined convent as a place full of discord, where nuns personify the sins of Pride, Hypocrisy, and Sloth. Thomas Robinson’s polemical pamphlet on Lisbon’s Syon Abbey describes the sisters as “silly seduced women” “whose unchaste practices...should make the Christian Reader blush,” and Thomas Goad’s *The Friars’ Chronicle* (1623) portrays nunneries as places where “a Gentlewoman taken in Adulterie, and so divorced” might go.¹¹ From past to present, convents have often been seen as dystopian spaces for women.¹²

The omission of convents from histories of utopia stems not only from their frequent association with dystopia but also from the more general absence of women in canonical utopias.¹³ Although utopia became a vital genre for feminist thought starting in the eighteenth century, early modern fictional utopias were largely dependent on a binary between a male adventurer and a penetrable feminized land. As Lee Cullen Khanna observes, More's Utopia is feminized by its crescent shape "like to the new moon," associating it with Artemis, the Greek goddess of virginity and of the moon. The island is overshadowed by a phallic rock and a man-made tower rising above.¹⁴ Voyagers who wish to attain the island must penetrate the horns of the crescent. This portrayal of a feminized island susceptible to penetration also appears in subsequent canonical literary utopias: in Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), Bensalem is "a good haven, being the port of a fair city."¹⁵ This haven is guarded against penetration by phallic weapons: "we saw divers of the people, with bastons in their hands (as it were) forbidding us to land."¹⁶ Women have little status within such worlds. Male sovereigns rule More's Utopia, whereas wives are "ministers to their husbands."¹⁷ Solomon's House in *New Atlantis* contains no women at all. In traditional literary history, therefore, utopian lands are feminized, but women are neither creators nor inhabitants. Jean Baudrillard sums up this dichotomy when he writes, "It is that naïve creature, man, who exudes utopias, one of these being precisely woman. The latter, being a living utopia, has no need to produce any."¹⁸

This absence of women in canonical early modern utopias is echoed by scholarship. No women authors are discussed in the Manuels' survey nor in Miriam Eliav-Feldon's *Realistic Utopias: The Ideal Imaginary Societies of the Renaissance, 1516–1630*.¹⁹ Cavendish is the only female author discussed in Amy Boesky's *Founding Fictions: Utopias in Early Modern England* and in Marina Leslie's *Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History* and the only pre-eighteenth-century author cited in Jane Donawerth's edited volume *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*. Medieval and early modern women's utopias, therefore, have collectively occupied a "no place" within utopia studies.

In recent decades, however, scholars of the English early modern period, such as Kate Lilley, Nicole Pohl, and Oddvar Holmesland, have begun to consider women's active roles in utopian thought before the eighteenth century.²⁰ They have shown how writers like Cavendish, Aphra Behn (1640–1689), Katherine Philips (1632–1664), and Aemelia Lanyer (1569–1645) imagined alternative spaces that challenged classical models

of utopia. My book contributes to and extends such revelations by tracing a history of women's utopian thought that dates back to medieval real-world convents and percolates outward to fictional texts. By showing how convents served as real and imaginary spaces in which to project desires for the future, I further unsettle the assumption that women had "no need" to create utopias. Indeed, I argue that given their marginalized situation within medieval and early modern society, women had all the more need to imagine different and better ways of being.

RELIGION AND UTOPIA

The fact that the early modern literary genre of utopia excluded women, particularly nuns, is one factor behind the exclusion of convents from histories of utopia; the marginalization of religious thought within the utopian discourse is another. Aside from a passing mention of monastic life in the Manuels' *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, most theorists consider religion to be antithetical to utopia's mission to create a better world. Religion is presumed to be preoccupied with the next world rather than this one.²¹ Kumar Krishna exemplifies this expectation when he argues that there is a fundamental contradiction between the notions of paradise in religious thought and utopia: "Religion typically has an other-worldly concern; utopia's interest is in this world."²² In her study of medieval utopias, Lochrie does not include apocalyptic and religious mysticism because "those sites represent what we usually consider to be the stranded back formations of early modern utopianism—stranded because of their failure to imagine utopia in this world."²³ Because so many records by or about medieval and early women concern religious life—monasteries being one of the primary places in which women were able to write—women's experiences are often excluded from histories of utopia.

And yet, religious life was integral to utopia. Jameson has identified More's own early experiences in a monastery as evidence of his enthusiasm for the religious form of life that was soon to be destroyed by Henry VIII.²⁴ Indeed, More's utopia bears a close resemblance to monasticism with its collective meals, common property, and dedication to virtue.²⁵ More's utopia may also have been influenced by Augustine's *City of God*. Just as Augustine's *civitas terrena* stands in parodic and mimetic relation to the *civitas dei*, utopia, with its puns and wordplay, is at once a parody of an ideal and an attempt to imagine that ideal.²⁶ Religion continued to influence the utopia genre after More, often in real-world rather than fictional settings. Puritan utopias, for instance, envisioned the displaced

populations of early modern Europe and North America as “the raw materials for an act of millennial poesis.”²⁷ Planned utopian communities such as Brook Farm in nineteenth-century Massachusetts were organized around religious philosophies.²⁸ Octavia Butler’s *Earthseed*, a fictional religion based on the belief that “God is Change” in *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *The Parable of the Talents* (1998), draws from real-world religious tradition. Far from antithetical to utopia, religion proves to be one of its main catalysts, even if it often remains hidden within theoretical discourse.

In this book, I make explicit the understated presence of medieval religious life in utopian thought by arguing that female monasticism was a vibrant site for utopia. This association emerges not because women’s communities are utopian in any essentialist way, but because the social circumstances of their lives within the Catholic Church forced them to chart alternative possibilities: being barred from positions of clerical authority, women religious had all the more motivation to imagine different paths to self-fulfillment and agency. As Janice Raymond writes, with the advent of Christianity’s marginalization of women, the convent “became the refuge of many women who still craved this power and independence. It offered opportunities undreamed of and unactualized by most women during these times.”²⁹ Eileen Power, one of the earliest scholars to chart a history of English women’s monasticism, showed how convents used their capacity as refuges to access education that would otherwise be denied to women.³⁰ These spaces served as bastions of women’s learning and self-governance at a time when women were otherwise denied such rights.

A further instrumental factor in monastic women’s aptitude for imagining utopia was enclosure. Unlike monks, who worked in the world, nuns were required to remain within their cloister. This expectation, though not always followed in practice, was enforced by the Bull *Periculosus* of 1298 and later by the Council of Trent. The notion (even if not actuality—as scholars have shown medieval nuns frequently defied enclosure) of the convent as a space removed from the world anticipates the physical and conceptual situation of utopia, which was most often represented as an unlocatable island in early modern fictional texts.³¹ In More’s *Utopia*, for instance, Utopus conquers a piece of land and separates it from the continent by digging a trench to make an island; in Bacon’s *New Atlantis* Bensalem is a mythical island discovered by a European ship crew; in Neville’s *The Isle of Pines* (1668), castaways are shipwrecked on an island in the southern hemisphere. The form of the island mirrors the concept of

utopia itself: it is a “good place that is nowhere.” Cut off from the world, utopia does not readily admit outsiders, who might corrupt its ideals. Similar types of removal from the world are apparent in more recent planned utopias such as India’s experimental town Auroville. Isolation is, therefore, key to utopian programs. Medieval and early modern convents duplicate this isolation: their walls separated them from the world, just as the seas separated utopian islands from the mainland. While this separation was intended to allow nuns to remain virtuous and chaste, it also had the effect of allowing these women to live in ways that challenged the norms of the outside world. Just as utopians unsettled assumptions about how systems like property and religion should work, nuns inherently defamiliarized traditional associations of women with the domestic and instead charted paths toward women’s independent authority.

Convents were, of course, still ruled by misogyny and often not idyllic places, but neither are utopias necessarily or even usually harmonious. Medieval and early modern convents, along with the writings inspired by these spaces, were utopian not because they were perfect but because they imagined alternatives to the present by privileging women’s bonds at a time when the culture was primarily invested in relationships between men. As Raymond observes, the convent was “a primary locus for the long-term institutionalization of female friendship under the aegis of sisterhood, a situation in which women spent their lives primarily with women, gave to women the largesse of their energy and attention, and formed powerful affective ties with each other.”³² The visualization of such relationships in the records of convents enabled a series of utopian practices and visions that influenced early secular feminist writers.

While it is often assumed that religious communities exclusively contemplate the attainment of heaven, the chapters of this book demonstrate that Catholic religious women were actively engaged in running institutions and intervened in the politics of their own times, especially when Catholicism in England was suppressed. Hence, these communities, contrary to popular belief, were very much invested in *this* world in addition to the next. As the records from convents as well as from convent-inspired communities like the Anglican Little Gidding and Mary Ward’s Society demonstrate, religious women asserted their collective agency in myriad forms, and they made this agency central to the worldly futures towards which they aspired. Thus, because of their marginalized position, religious women were able to imagine alternatives to passive femininity and to take action to establish such alternative worlds through their writings.

By framing women's religious communities as prescient sites of utopianism, this book not only revises standard accounts of utopia as a genre but also nuances more recent accounts of women's utopia, which are predominantly secular. Such histories often begin with Cavendish and trace the genre from women's pedagogical utopias such as Mary Astell's (1666–1731) *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) and Clara Reeve's (1729–1807) *Plans of Education* (1792) to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's (1689–1762) portrayal of the *hammam* as a utopian female space in *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) and Scott's bluestocking manifesto, *Millenium Hall*.³³ Such standard histories of women's utopia also include Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851–1853), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1860–1935) *Herland* (1905) as well as more recent science fiction writings by Octavia Butler (1947–2006), Marge Piercy (1936–), and Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018). This genealogy of secular writers omits convents, which were the first separatist women's communities in the western world. *New Kingdoms* not only recovers a missing chapter in the history of women's utopianism but, by identifying female devotional community as a locus of utopia, revises conventional assumptions about the secularity of this intellectual tradition.

BRICOLAGE FUTURES

The utopianism that women's religious communities mobilized was at once continuous and at odds with utopias produced in other settings. Convents and the women's writings influenced by them resonate with other utopias in their visions of ideal futures that challenge present-day realities. Such futures range from the sheer possibility that women could wield independent authority to visions of a future return of Catholicism to England. However, given that women had historically been excluded from literary, religious, and intellectual discourses, these communities often found themselves drawing on misogynistic source material—religious rules, historical documents, literary genres, and theological ideas—to imagine futures that would include women. Operating within the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church, they reused a past that had rejected them to imagine the future. Early women's utopias thus offer urgent and self-conscious examples of utopia's need to rework the past; they chart a utopianism that works within the limits of what is possible to imagine futures that also explodes those limits.

To capture the way in which women's spiritual communities and the literary utopias that they inspired both absorbed and reformed pre-existing

ideas, I draw on the notion of bricolage developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss refers to bricolage as the creation of mythical thought “by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited.”³⁴ The “bricoleur,” whom Lévi-Strauss approximates to “the savage mind,” is “someone who works with his [*sic*] hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman.”³⁵ A *bricoleur* “uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him,” putting pre-existing materials together to create something new.³⁶ This process, in Lévi-Strauss’s view, is what constructs mythological narratives and is opposed to the work of the engineer, who approximates the “scientific mind” and who constructs the totality of a discourse from “raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project.”³⁷ In Jacques Derrida’s summation, bricolage is “the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined.”³⁸ The elements that the *bricoleur* employs, therefore, “are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of maneuver.”³⁹ For a material instantiation of this practice, we might think about collage, a work created from clippings borrowed from elsewhere and assembled to create a “whole” picture. In such a process, if, for instance, an image of a pencil is repurposed to create a mouth, it nonetheless retains its previous identity as a pencil. So too, in more conceptual forms of bricolage, old ideas retain their previous meanings even as they come to signify in new contexts.⁴⁰

Though emerging from the anthropological study of myth in tribal cultures, Lévi-Strauss’s work makes the broader point that signs may be used for purposes for which they were not intended, a process that results in discourses that may contain competing or contradicting ideas. This quality may, in fact, be true of any discourse. Derrida argues that the engineer is, in fact, a myth created by the bricoleur and that “every discourse is bricoleur.”⁴¹ As it emerges from the conversation between Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, the idea of bricolage generates a new way of thinking about systems and structures without falling into the trap of trying to build a new stable system out of the ruins of a deconstructed one. It offers a way to think without establishing a new center and makes possible alternative methods of putting ideas together within the limits of what is possible.

Though bricolage has been deployed in many contexts, it has a particularly illuminating and largely unrecognized role within utopian thought. Utopias often present themselves as the products of engineering: they