Women’s special relationship to books of hours is a commonplace in scholarship on late medieval manuscripts and women. Susan Groag Bell first called attention to women’s attraction to vernacular books and devotional books, particularly books of hours. Female book owners were “arbiters of lay piety and ambassadors of culture,” because, through reading and patronage, they actively supported pious practices and the new vernacular literature. Adapted from the breviary priests and monks used for prayer, the book of hours was the laity’s prayer book. From its first appearance in the thirteenth century until well into the sixteenth century, it was the book most commonly owned by anyone who owned a book. Men as well as women owned and read them. But books of hours had a special meaning for women. In this essay I comment on women’s ownership and use of books of hours. I discuss Francophone examples, but there is no reason to think the situation differed in England or elsewhere on the continent.

Many of the earliest books of hours were commissioned by laywomen, among them “Marie,” the owner of a Parisian book of hours from the 1270s. Female patrons remained influential in the development of the book of hours through the fourteenth century. Women from royal and noble families commissioned manuscripts for their personal use, often from the greatest artists of the day. Two examples are the exquisite books of hours owned by Blanche of Burgundy (d. 1348) and Jeanne d’Evreux (d. 1371). After around 1400, royal and noble patrons still commissioned books of hours, but the books also became increasingly popular among
lay people of lesser social station. Both men and women avidly acquired books of hours during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when mass-produced (shop copy) manuscripts and printed books became widely available. Most of these books were designed to be used by anyone. And yet some booksellers’ inventories from the sixteenth century list dozens of copies of printed “hours for the use of women,” suggesting that there were books of hours meant specifically for women. Books are also on occasion described as “woman’s book of hours” in inventories after death, perhaps a reference to the embellished bindings and covers women crafted for what they sometimes called “my best prayer book.”

How do we know which books of hours were owned by women? Some—like those belonging to “Marie” and Blanche of Burgundy—including owners’ names or portraits. Manuscripts customized for women might include special devotions for pregnant women or mothers. But some books of hours were clearly used by both women and their families. This was common for books that may have been wedding gifts to either a bride or a couple. But women who owned books of hours before marrying also transformed their books into family possessions after becoming mothers. The manuscript belonging to the thirteenth-century “Marie” was her private prayer book, as well as a primer for teaching her children to read and pray. A later example is a fifteenth-century manuscript from Normandy, owned (and inscribed) in the sixteenth century by Marie du Moncel. When Marie du Moncel married, her book became her family’s book of hours. Her husband, and later her son and grandson, wrote a family record book inside it. So a book of hours could be both a woman’s personal prayer book and a family book.

It is difficult to know how women used books of hours to guide prayer. But hand-written additions in books we know were owned by women can show us how owners used their books of hours. Two examples illustrate how women made prayer books their own by preserving in them precious fragments of their religious practice. The first example is a short French text, titled “this is the prayer that Notre Dame du Puy holds in her hand,” inscribed in two women’s prayer books from Paris. The prayer is addressed to Our Lady of Le Puy, an image of the Virgin Mary and child Jesus enshrined in the cathedral of Le Puy-en-Auvergne, the object of a
popular pilgrimage. Notre Dame du Puy was a patron of infertile and pregnant women, so it is fitting that this prayer is found in two books owned by women. The prayer itself is a simple one: the devotee dedicates herself to the Virgin “in soul and body,” and asks that the Virgin protect her from sin, comfort her, and pray to Jesus on her behalf. The prayer may have been associated with a Paris confraternity, shrine, or altar dedicated to Notre-Dame du Puy. These book owners may have copied the prayer from a tableau posted in a chapel, or more likely transcribed it from memory into their books so they could recite it at home.

The second example typifies what are sometimes called “magical” or “superstitious” practices (although those terms say more about modern critics’ prejudices than they do about the lives and beliefs of late medieval and early modern women). Louise Mareschal, the owner of a sixteenth-century printed book of hours, wrote the following on one of her book’s end pages: “May the five wounds of Jesus Christ be my medicine. . . . Wear this letter for nine months and say it every day with the Pater Noster and nine Ave Marias.” This is a prayer-amulet, a bit of writing meant to be attached to the body by being tied on, worn around the neck, or enclosed in a tiny bundle or piece of jewelry. Louise may have copied hers from another example (perhaps her mother’s or midwife’s) or from memory. Her book of hours itself may have served as a kind of amulet: an object to be worn or held or touched as much as read.

Books of hours were precious possessions. They were valued not only for the prayers and images enclosed in their covers, but also because they testified to and even embodied their owners’ lives and relationships. Women considered their books of hours intimate possessions, objects to be passed down as a precious legacy to daughters, goddaughters, and dearest friends. Patterns of gift giving and inheritance show this. To be sure, women sometimes gave books of hours to men, often sons or sons-in-law. And men gave books to the women in their lives, usually their wives and daughters. But gifts among women were special: they wove webs of reciprocity, in which prayers and prayer books were signs of affection and enduring relationships. Noblewomen gave lavishly illuminated books of hours to close female friends and family. But women of lesser station were also generous with books. The widows of a Tournai mercer and a master
glassmaker left prayer books to women friends and relations. A manuscript book of hours (ca. 1460) was passed down through more than four generations of women in one Amiens family. Printed books could be equally precious heirlooms passed down to daughters, nieces, and granddaughters.

The book of hours was a special kind of legacy from a woman to her female heirs, or to deliberately chosen spiritual descendants like goddaughters, friends, or fellow nuns. Such legacies carried with them the donor’s hope that the emotional and spiritual bonds uniting friends or godmothers and goddaughters would endure past her death. This might mean praying for the soul of the deceased, or perhaps following the donor’s life of piety. In her 1405 will, Marie Narrette, a single woman from Douai, left her two “best” books of hours to her godmother and goddaughter, with the request that both pray for her. A century later, Anne La Routye, a nun at the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris, asked in a note she wrote in her book that whoever inherited her book of hours “pray to God for the dead.” Women also gave books to religious communities in a personal way. Philippe de Gueldre (d. 1547), duchess of Lorraine, gave manuscripts to convents including those for which she was a patron and the Franciscan convent to which she retired after her husband died. She used gifts to affirm relationships of friendship and spiritual support. But convents, hospitals, and béguinages also received books of hours from women of modest means, who may not have had as much to give, and whose gifts may for that reason have been more precious. As these gifts reveal, intensely spiritual and personal meanings adhered to women’s books of hours.

Notes

For the Use of Women


13. See Don C. Skemer, Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006), esp. chapter 5.


20. La Grange, “Choix de testaments,” nos. 72, 93, 712, 739, 770, 1143.