

FEMALE LITERACY AND THE SOCIAL IDENTITY
OF THE CLERGY FAMILY IN THE
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

JACQUELINE EALES

Women's reading and writing habits in the early modern period have largely been studied through the evidence from aristocratic and gentry families, whose papers were the most likely to have survived and who comprised the social ranks with the highest rates of female literacy.¹ In contrast, a comprehensive assessment of female literacy in English clerical families has yet to be written, so some central lines of enquiry will be drawn here using evidence from Kent as a case study. The example of Elizabeth Elstob, who can lay claim to be Kent's first bluestocking, is of particular interest to this enquiry.² She was the daughter of a Newcastle merchant and was orphaned in the early 1690s at the age of eight, when she was sent to live with her uncle, Charles Elstob, a prebendary at Canterbury Cathedral. Elizabeth later described her uncle as 'no friend to women's learning', but she overcame his opposition to become the first female Anglo-Saxonist scholar. Her study of Old English Kent sources and her views on female education will be analysed later in this essay.³ This will help to contextualise the nature of Elizabeth Elstob's unique literary achievements as well as her own views as an educationalist.

Before examining the evidence, it is important to emphasise that the clerical family provided a very different social context for the exercise of female literacy than that of lay households. The protestant clergy regarded reading and writing as crucial to the social identity of the reformed clerical family. By the early seventeenth century, when clerical marriage had become well established, they were taking great care to manage the literacy of their female relatives. This management was intended to guide these women to become understanding Christians as well as to reinforce social relations within the clerical family. It also enhanced the positive ways in which the clergy publicly defined the roles of women within the post-Reformation clerical household. Women educated in clerical homes were given an exceptionally intense religious training, which was tightly focussed on reading the Bible and works of practical piety in English. The

evidence from Kent, and elsewhere, demonstrates that there was very little provincial variation in this training. These women were thus encouraged to take part in a smoothed national Protestant culture, in which conformist or dissenting clerical authors were read for their value as spiritual guides, rather than as controversialists.⁴ Theological controversy was regarded as confusing to the laity. Thus in a letter of advice, Elizabeth Bury, who was educated in the mid-seventeenth century in the house of her step-father, an East Anglian dissenting cleric, later wrote 'I can never think it wisdom to put young heads on disputable points, where they may be safely edified by practical divinity'.⁵

The clergy generally guided their daughters and other female relatives to write for private spiritual study or for circulation within the immediate family and not for publication. Given the importance placed by the reformed clergy on the religious education of their families and of the laity more widely, it is plausible to argue here that the literacy rates of women educated by clerical relatives rivalled those of aristocratic and gentry women, and may even have approached 100 per cent by the end of the seventeenth century.

While the functioning of early modern patriarchy has been recognised as highly fluid for some social groups, within the clerical home patriarchal and gender boundaries were much more rigid. Aristocratic and gentry women were able to represent their families' regional power or oversee the running of provincial estates in the absence of their male relatives, while urban widows could even take over their husbands' trades. Girls from these social groups were trained with these expectations in mind.⁶ In contrast, clerical wives and daughters could never exercise the sacred functions of the ministry and their training reflected this fact. The reading and writing habits inculcated in women raised in clerical families were thus intended to make them exceptionally receptive to patriarchal codes of female modesty and deference to male authority.⁷ At her death in 1669 Mabella Finch, the widow of the royalist courtier Sir John Finch, was described as the 'honour' of Canterbury Cathedral, where her father, Charles Fotherby had been dean. Mabella was praised for carefully covering her wisdom and goodness with 'the vail of humility and singular modesty'.⁸ The public emphasis on the piety and modesty of women from clerical families like Mabella was designed not just to portray them as respectable women, but more importantly to counter accusations of sexual scandal aimed at the Protestant institution of clerical marriage by its Roman Catholic opponents. Clerical marriage had first been legalised in Edward VI's reign, yet the scandal attached to ministers' sexual activity still persisted and clergy wives and daughters had been stigmatised as 'whores' and 'bastards' within living memory. In 1588 a Canterbury woman, Katherine Horton, had been called before the Court of High Commission for, amongst other things, calling a local cleric's

daughter a 'priest's bastard and bastardly whore'.⁹ Defamations of this sort became less frequent in the seventeenth century, but the benefits of clerical marriage were still subject to doubt, even amongst some members of the reformed clergy.¹⁰

In order to protect the reputation of the clerical family, it was therefore vital that the **sexual, religious and social conduct of women raised in clergy homes was seen as exemplary**. This was achieved partly through the clergy's vigilant control over these women's exercise of literacy, which made their religious reading, studying and writing practices praiseworthy at a time when female literacy was seen as potentially subversive. Thus at her funeral in 1654 Mary Smith, the wife of a London draper and daughter of a Kent minister, was described by the preacher Nathaniel Hardy as spending much of her time 'in the pious services of reading, meditation, and prayer, not neglecting the publique ordinances'. Mary's religious education enabled her to 'performe' her family and social duties conscientiously as 'a Daughter, a Wife, a Mistresse, Sister, Neighbour, [and] Friend'.¹¹ Funeral sermons such as this have been seen as formulaic, but as Peter Lake has argued such spiritual biographies or godly lives were also designed to commemorate the highly personal experiences of the individual.¹² Moreover, the connection that Hardy made between Mary's pious education and her ability to perform her 'duties' to her relations so well vividly illustrates the importance that the clergy attached to the direction of female literacy within the clerical home.

The clergy guided their female relatives in the selection of reading material and advised them on how to be active readers by creating a variety of personal writings from the sermons which they heard and from the religious texts that they read. At the heart of this education lay an exceptionally religious programme of life-long female learning, which was focussed on a thorough knowledge of the Bible and familiarity with popular devotional authors. Their privileged religious education endowed these women with a measure of religious authority, which extended in exceptional cases to the publication of their writings (often posthumously). The clergy were therefore very careful in their management of this female authority and sought to ensure that the exercise of literacy by women within their households remained within accepted religious and patriarchal boundaries. The nature of this guidance is well illustrated by the programme of reading and writing outlined by the regicide and Independent divine, Hugh Peters, to his twenty year-old daughter, published after his execution in *A Dying Fathers Last Legacy to an Onely Child* (1660). Peters explained that he had previously commended 'a Little English library to his daughter', Elizabeth. As he approached his death, he advised a close and constant reading of the Bible: 'this one book', he wrote, 'will answer any question'.

A familiarity with the Bible was regarded by the clergy as crucial to the

foundation of Christian faith. It was seen as an armour against spiritual temptation as well as a preparative for death, and was thus part of the life-long programme of spiritual learning outlined here for Peters' daughter. He also suggested a number of books by English divines writing largely in the early Stuart puritan and the later Independent traditions.¹³ The pattern of practical devotional reading outlined by Peters is precisely mirrored in a case study of the wills of 164 clerics from the dioceses of Rochester and Canterbury proved in the prerogative court of Canterbury in the seventeenth century. Eighteen of these ministers left books to female relatives and the recipients included a mother, an aunt, five sisters, nine wives, seven daughters, two grand-daughters, and a daughter-in-law. This, of course, represents only one aspect of the engagement of these and other women with the books owned by their clerical relatives. These women had privileged access to the clerical libraries, no matter how small, which were kept in their homes. They may also have been given books as gifts when they were very young and were learning to read, at their coming of age or on the occasion of their marriage. The wills show that seven of the clerical testators left their entire libraries to a son or a grandson while also making bequests of specific books to their female relatives.

In keeping with Hugh Peter's advice, these bequests demonstrate that the Bible and other religious works in English were regarded by these clerics as the most suitable books for female readers. English books were seen as particularly appropriate for women who, outside aristocratic and gentry circles, were rarely encouraged to master classical or even foreign languages.¹⁴ Elizabeth Elstob thus recalled that she had obtained her uncle's permission to learn French with great difficulty, 'being always put off, with that common and vulgar saying that one tongue is enough for a woman'.¹⁵

Six of our Kent testators left bequests of Bibles to their female relatives, one left a 'an English catechism' to his daughter, another left a copy of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* to his daughter, six left unspecified English books to female relatives, one left all his printed books to his wife, another allowed his wife to choose six of his 'English books for her own use ... except law manuscripts and books', and one allowed his wife to have any books that she chose. Five ministers left specified English books to their female relatives including the works of Gervase Babington, the Bishop of Worcester, and of Joseph Hall, the Bishop of Norwich.¹⁶ Apart from the Bible, the books which were identified as gifts for female relatives were overwhelmingly works of practical devotion. For example, in 1651 Henry Chauntler, the minister of Staple left William Fenner's *Works*, Samuel Smith's *Davids Blessed Man*, (a treatise on the first psalm), and John Rogers' *The Doctrine of Faith* to his wife.¹⁷ In 1686 John Powle, the vicar of Dartford left instructions that his grandsons and a granddaughter,

Barbara, should each be given copies of the *The Marrow of the Oracles of God* by Nicholas Byfield and *The Summe of the Principles* by Byfield's son Adoniram, with the instruction that they 'should read and study them all the days of their life'.¹⁸ With the exception of Adoniram Byfield, all of these writers have been identified by Ian Green as amongst the best selling religious authors of the century.¹⁹ Initial research into clerical wills from Herefordshire and Yorkshire suggests that this pattern of bequests was replicated in other regions.²⁰

These bequests are indicative of the guidance dispensed by the clergy, but the reconstruction of the reading and writing practices of their female relatives is not straightforward, as relatively few of these women's own manuscripts have survived before the late seventeenth century. This is partly because the personal papers of the professional classes were unlikely to have been preserved with the same care as the manuscripts of the landed classes, which were often kept with estate and other legal papers as part of a family archive. Moreover, the writings of daughters, wives and other female relatives were generally intended by the clergy to be contained with the family circle. A few of their writings such as those of Elizabeth Bury were published posthumously by admiring male relatives as evidence of their exemplary piety and as a model for other women to follow.²¹ A small number of women from clerical families published their own work in the period, but those who did so were likely to be living in London and to have contacts with the London press. Elizabeth Elstob, for example, did not publish any of her translations until she left Canterbury to live with her brother in London.

This was also true of Rachel Speght, the daughter of James Speght, minister at the London parish of St Mary Magdalen, Milk Street, who was the first woman from a clerical home to publish her own work. As Mary Morrissey has suggested, she may have been encouraged to do so, because her father acted as a licenser for the press between 1607 and 1610.²² Her most famous publication was *A Mouzell [Muzzle] for Melastomus* (1617), a spirited refutation of the hack writer Joseph Swetnam's *Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Forward, and Unconstant Women* (1615), which denigrated the nature of women. *A Mouzell* displays an authoritative tone based on the author's thorough knowledge of the Bible and a familiarity with some of the anthologies of classical and Christian sources, which were popular at the time.²³ The question of whether the modest classical learning displayed by Speght in her writing was more widely shared by women from clerical families can also be approached through the evidence of the wills of the seventeenth-century Kent clergy analysed above. The testators regarded books in learned languages as suitable legacies solely for male scholars and six of them specified that Greek, Latin and Hebrew books and manuscripts should be left to their sons, to other ministers or to university colleges, while tellingly none of the 18 testators specifically

left a book in a foreign language to a female relative.²⁴ This suggests that anthologies, such as those used by Speght, would have been the most likely route by which most literate women gained a knowledge of the classics at the time.

Speght's final publications were two poems published in 1621: *Mortalities Memorandum* recounts the death of her mother and the allegorical poem *A Dreame* concerns female education and the difficulties that women encountered in overcoming the disease of ignorance. Female education was a particular theme in the publications of other women educated by the clergy in the final decades of the seventeenth century including Elizabeth Elstob and more famously Mary Astell, the Tory philosopher and advocate of female learning. Like Elizabeth, Mary Astell was the daughter of a Newcastle merchant and similarly Astell's education during the formative ages of 10-13 in the late 1670s was undertaken by her uncle, Ralph Astell, a suspended curate, whose positive influence on his niece's intellectual development has been brilliantly outlined by Sarah Apetrei.²⁵

Speght's works are, however, a unique example of a woman from a clerical family publishing her own writing before the civil wars. As Patricia Crawford has demonstrated, female authors published 651 known original works in the seventeenth century, which constituted less than 2 per cent of the total number of publications in the period, so Speght's lone status is not surprising. The two major themes of women's printed works in the years before the Restoration were practical devotion and domestic advice, as both were regarded as suitable topics for female authors. From the mid-seventeenth century a minority of female authors also handled themes of politics, philosophy and science in print, as well as publishing plays for the London stage.²⁶ Yet very few women educated in clerical families actively participated in the printed debates of the civil war and Restoration, and those who did are generally to be found within the religious sects. Their radicalism made these women subject to the censure of clerical critics and their writings were seen as problematic and subversive. Thus Elizabeth Avery's *Scripture Prophecies Opened* (1647), a prophetic work in epistolatory form, was fiercely repudiated by her own brother, Thomas Parker, a New England Presbyterian minister, who complained that printing a book 'above the custom of your sex, doth rankly smell'.²⁷ More generally, though, the clergy's strong emphasis on patriarchal values acted as a restraint on their wives and daughters entering into public debate at all during the civil wars.²⁸

Despite the problems of manuscript survival and limited print evidence, there are some very well documented examples of the reading and writing practices of women educated in clergy families in the late seventeenth century. Amongst the most extensive manuscript collections is that of Sarah Savage, the eldest daughter of the Flintshire dissenting minister

Philip Henry, who systematically kept a series of diaries, wrote sermon notes and letters, and copied manuscripts for circulation within her family.²⁹ Sarah Savage started her diary in 1686 at the age of 22, when she was still living with her parents in Flintshire.³⁰ She decided to keep it 'being encouraged by the great advantages others have got thereby & by the hopes that I may thereby bee furthered in a godly life'. On the front leaf of the diary she also recorded the discouragements she expected in writing it, including her own religious 'barrenness & deadness', and the fear that it would come to the 'view of others', which emphasised the highly private nature of such writing.³¹ Sarah also recorded her reading of the Bible as well as a variety of popular puritan authors, both privately and 'in the family'.³²

In contrast we have the papers of Elizabeth Elstob who, as we have seen was educated in the Anglican tradition in the 1690s in the home of her uncle, a Canterbury prebendary. Elstob is remembered for her publications on Old English sources and a number of her letters to her patrons and to members of her scholarly circle, as well as her transcripts of Old English sources, have also survived. **The concerns about female education and the uses of women's literacy expressed by both Speght and Savage are also apparent in Elizabeth's writing.** Her love of books had first been encouraged by her mother, whom she described as 'a great admirer of learning, especially in her own sex', but Elizabeth had only just learned her 'accidence and grammar' when her mother died. In her uncle's home she spent most of her time reading 'such English and French books ... as she could meet with'. Elizabeth regarded her older brother William as her 'tutor', and she went to live with him in London after he became a minister there in 1702. **She later described how he 'very joyfully, and readily assisted and encouraged her, in her studies',** which included some Latin, Anglo-Saxon culture and Old English.³³

Through her brother Elizabeth also became associated with a group of Anglo-Saxonist scholars at Oxford, whose intellectual mentor was George Hickes, the former Dean of Worcester, who had been deprived for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to William and Mary (nonjuring). Hickes supported women's education and counted a number of other female authors amongst his intellectual circle, including Susanna Hopton, although he also conducted a controversy with Astell about the issue of nonjuring. Elizabeth's other correspondents included Humfrey Wanley, the Old English scholar and library keeper to Robert Harley, the first Earl of Oxford, Ralph Thoresby, the Yorkshire antiquarian and Robert Nelson, the London philanthropist.³⁴

In 1708 Elizabeth published her translation of Madeleine de Scudery's *Essay upon Glory*, modestly describing herself anonymously as 'a person of the same sex' as the author. The religious nature of the *Essay*, which argued that glory belonged properly only to God and not to Man, made

it a suitable topic for a woman to handle in print. Elizabeth also took the opportunity of her first publication to reinforce her networks of female supporters. The work was dedicated to her aunt, Matilda Elstob, and to a childhood friend, Mary Randolph, the daughter of a Canterbury lawyer. In the dedication Elizabeth cited the examples of Elizabeth I and Queen Anne as proof that women should not be ‘envied’ the opportunities of learning and improvement, ‘which are too frequently almost generally deny’d them’. She also reminded her aunt that she had learned French in her home in Canterbury and she referred to the love of learning which she shared with Mary and in which ‘you [Mary] employ the greatest part of your time’. The two young women had spent many ‘happy hours’ together sighing out ‘our wishes’ for the freedom to study Greek and Latin. Elizabeth also included her own translations of quotations from the works of Cicero at the end of the dedication.³⁵ The following year Elizabeth translated *An English-Saxon Homily on the Birth-day of St. Gregory*, a work by the tenth-century monk Aelfric, and published it in a parallel Old English text with full editorial notes.

The *Homily* dealt at length with Augustine’s mission to Kent to convert the English to Christianity and contained letters from Augustine to the first Christian king and queen of Kent, Aethelbert and Bertha. Elizabeth was named as the translator on the title page and, in her dedication to Queen Anne, she linked the foundation and preservation of English Christianity to other powerful women, including the Emperor Constantine’s mother ‘the Ever Glorious Helena’ and the first ‘English Christian Queen, Bertha [*sic*]. It was ‘your Illustrious Predecessor Elizabeth’, she continued, who had restored the Christian faith from ‘many Corruptions’. In the Preface Elizabeth returned to the theme of women’s education and commented that it would now be said of her ‘What hath a Woman to do with Learning?’. This was the prelude to her vigorous defence of female scholarship: ‘there are two things usually opposed against Women’s Learning. That it makes them impertinent, and neglect their household Affairs. Where this happens is a Fault. But it is not the Fault of Learning’. She decried fashionable women who spent more time at the theatre, in dressing, visits and ‘other diversions’ than at study.³⁶ The 281 subscribers to this volume included aristocratic patrons of learning from the Harley and Thynne families, as well as members of Elizabeth’s family, such as her uncle and aunt, Charles and Matilda Elstob, and her friend Mary Randolph. The subscription list included five bishops, 40 other clerics and scholars from the two universities, as well as Hickes, Wanley, and Thoresby. There was also a high proportion of women with 122 female subscribers including well known patrons of learning, such as Elizabeth Hastings and Katherine Jones. The female relatives of clerics from London and Canterbury were also well represented, including Mary Stanhope, daughter of the dean of Canterbury, George Stanhope.³⁷

Elizabeth's intellectual interests in Old English linked her firmly to a national revival of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, which also had a particular foothold in Kent. The revival had been led by the Elizabethan Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, partly with the aim of demonstrating that the post-Reformation Church in England had firm foundations in its Anglo-Saxon past. William Lambarde, the Kent lawyer and antiquary, was a central figure in the circle of scholars studying the manuscripts collected by the archbishop and he drew on Old English documents from Kent in his county history, the *Perambulation of Kent*, published in 1576. Seventeenth-century Kent antiquaries, including William Somner of Canterbury, had also used Old English Kent sources in their work.³⁸ Elizabeth identified firmly with these traditions and in the Preface to the *Homily* she emphasised that Christianity had been received in England from the Roman Church when it was 'a sound and uncorrupt Branch of the Catholick Church' and thereafter the English Church had been pure in its faith and discipline 'for some Ages'. After a long 'night of Ignorance and Superstition' it was 'revived and restored' by the Reformation. She concluded that the reformed Church in England 'is no new Church, but the same it was before the Roman Church was corrupted'.³⁹

She also made a particular study of the *Textus Roffensis*, an early twelfth-century manuscript collection produced for Rochester cathedral containing documents in Old English and Latin. She transcribed the Old English seventh-century laws promulgated by the Kentish kings Aethelbert, Hlothere, Eadric and Withraed, as well as Aethelbert's supposed foundation charter for the Cathedral church of St Andrew's from the *Textus*. This was designed as a presentation copy for Robert Harley, whom she described as the greatest patron of learning 'in this nation' and it now resides in the Harleian collection in the British Library.⁴⁰ Harley, his wife and children had subscribed to the *Homily* and, as Lord Treasurer in 1714, he authorised the payment of £100 to Elizabeth from Queen Anne in support of a more ambitious project to publish all of Aelfric's homilies.⁴¹ Elizabeth also published a lengthy letter to her uncle entitled *Some Testimones of Learned Men in Favour of the Intended Edition of the Saxon Homilies* (1713) as an inducement to subscribers for this new venture.

Charles Elstob now supported his niece's studies, probably because of the encouragement she had received from notable scholars at the two universities of Cambridge and Oxford. In 1715 she published her last work, *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (Fig. 1), which was the first Old English grammar to be published in English. In her continuing search for eminent female patronage, Elizabeth dedicated this work to the Princess of Wales asking her to accept it as 'the humble Tribute of a Female'. In the preface she extensively analysed the similarities between Old English word forms and more recent literature, liberally citing Chaucer, Sydney, and Jonson as well as contemporary

JACQUELINE EALES

THE
RUDIMENTS
OF
GRAMMAR
FOR THE
English-Saxon Tongue,

First given in ENGLISH:

WITH AN

APOLOGY

For the Study of

NORTHERN ANTIQUITIES.

Being very useful towards the understanding our
ancient *English* POETS, and other WRITERS.

By ELIZABETH ELSTOB.

*Our Earthly Possessions are truly enough called a PATR.
to us by the Industry of our FATHERS; but the
Speak is our MOTHER-TONGUE; And who so prof
ticks in this as the FEMALEs.*

In a Letter from a Right Reverend Pr

L O N D O N,

Printed by *W. Bowyer*: And Sold by *J. Bow*
in *Ludgate-street*, and *C. KING* in *Westminst*



Fig. 1 The title page to Elizabeth Elstob's *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* and (inset) an engraving of her from the *English-Saxon Homily*.

poets amongst her sources.⁴² Despite Elizabeth's early renown, the death of both her brother and Hickes in 1715 suddenly ended her scholarly career. Finding herself in debt, Elizabeth left London and later ran a girls' school in Evesham, but she lost contact with her former intellectual associates.⁴³ Many of her papers were also lost during this upheaval, but her later correspondence with George Ballard survives in the Bodleian Library.⁴⁴

From 1739 Elizabeth was employed as a governess by Harley's granddaughter, Margaret, Duchess of Portland and she died in 1756. Before taking up her post with the duchess's family, Elizabeth wrote to her describing her educational methods and lamenting 'how much the education of our youth, especially that of the females is neglected'. Her concerns about the state of women's education expressed here were strongly influenced by the educational programmes developed by the seventeenth-century clergy for their female relatives. She thus ensured her employer that she would instil the 'principles of religion and virtue' in her daughters and would teach them to read, write and speak in English, instructing them in the rules of English grammar, 'etymology etc'. Then she would acquaint them with the histories of 'our own and other countreys' and other 'usefull and good books, as shall be thought proper for their improvement'. Elizabeth considered this to be the 'material' part of education and 'the most lasting', which would cultivate and improve the minds of her charges, and she compared it with the vogue for hiring a dancing master, a French master or a boarding school mistress, 'who know little of the matter' of education.⁴⁵

In her brief autobiography, Elizabeth described herself as the first woman to have studied Old English 'since it was spoke' and the fact that relatively few men understood the language meant that most male critics of female learning would have been unqualified to comment on her work. She was concerned though that her researches into an 'obsolete' tongue would be dismissed simply as a worthless endeavour and at its publication wrote to Thoresby to ask him to defend the *Homily* 'against the censure of the criticks'.⁴⁶ Her acceptance by the leading male scholars in the field was facilitated partly by her brother's promotion of her studies. Her interests in early Church History and the laws of the first Christian kings of Kent were also entirely compatible with the clergy's emphasis on the suitability of religion as the basis of the reading and writing practices of their female relatives. Her writing also remained firmly within the Anglican, orthodox tradition that she would have encountered amongst the clergy in Canterbury Cathedral in the 1690s and thus she endorsed the 'Venerable Hierarchy' of bishops. In the preface to the *Homily*, she argued that the 'Polity and Discipline of the English Saxon Church' was settled in episcopacy and had continued in succession without interruption 'to these times'.⁴⁷ Elizabeth's access to male sponsorship also rested on the broader entry of women such as Mary Astell into the intellectual and publishing

circles of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Astell's own publications included the very popular *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), in which she argued for the institution of a female college of learning and raised crucial issues about the nature and importance of female education.⁴⁸

More typically, however, women from clerical families were encouraged to think of their writing practices largely as private, family-based exercises and, unlike Speght and Elstob, very few of them published their writings during their own lifetimes in the Stuart period. As a result, it is difficult to establish the social, religious and intellectual networks in which more than a few of them participated. In particular, it is hard to identify whether these women developed networks of female support through their writing practices as Elstob did. The relative invisibility of the reading and writing practices of most women from clerical families should not, however, lead us to ignore the clerical home as a key focus for female literacy in the seventeenth century. The importance which the clergy attached to the education of their daughters and other female relatives was, however, conditioned by the fact that even at the end of the seventeenth century clerical families retained a dubious moral status for some. In 1697 in a sermon in St Paul's Cathedral, George Stanhope, then vicar of Lewisham in Kent and future dean of Canterbury, said 'I need not say, how much the Clergy and their Families stand like the common mark for Censure and Detraction'.⁴⁹ The clergy thus guided and managed the reading and writing habits of women within their families in order to make them highly receptive to patriarchal codes of conduct. As a result there is an inevitable emphasis in these women's surviving manuscripts and printed works on religious reading and writing. Elizabeth Elstob emerged from this milieu as an exceptional scholar, but one whose body of work and educational methods were nevertheless grounded in religious learning and enquiry. The life-long religious education that women received in clergy homes produced a new social class of literate women, who could draw on their reading and writing practices to demonstrate an exceptional knowledge and authority about religion. More widely it enabled the clergy to depict their wives and daughters as respectable models of both female piety and deference within the early modern patriarchal family. These developments all played a significant part in the construction of the social identity of the clerical family and helped to make the presence of wives and daughters in clergy households a key defining characteristic of seventeenth-century English Protestantism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Penelope Corfield and Richard Eales for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay, to Ian Green for discussions

about this topic, to Bernard Sharratt for sharing his knowledge of Elizabeth Elstob with her, and to Lorraine Flisher and Stephen Rowstone for their research assistance on a wider project involving female literacy in seventeenth-century clergy families. She would also like to thank the University of Nottingham, Manuscripts and Special Collections for permission to quote from Elizabeth Elstob's letter to the Duchess of Portland held in the Portland Manuscripts.

ENDNOTES

¹ As illustrative examples see J. Pearson, 'Women Reading, reading women', in H. Wilcox (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 80-99; K. Charlton, *Women, Religion and Education in Early Modern England* (Routledge, 1999); J. Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450-1700* (Basingstoke, 2001); *idem*, *Women Letter Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford, 2006). For an exception see Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009). See also D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980); M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1981) and A. Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700* (Oxford, 2000).

² Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-Century Bluestockings* (National Portrait Gallery, 2008), see pp. 39, 64-5 for Elstob.

³ Bodleian Library, Ballard Ms. 43 f. 59r-60r.

⁴ Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000), p. ix.

⁵ Samuel Bury, *An Account of the Life and Death of Mrs Elizabeth Bury* (1720), p. 165.

⁶ Linda Pollock, "'Teach Her to Live Under Obedience': the Making of Women in the Upper Ranks in Early Modern England", *Continuity and Change*, Vol. 4 (1989); Mary Prior, 'Women and the Urban Economy: Oxford 1500-1800', in Mary Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society, 1500-1800* (London, 1985).

⁷ Jacqueline Eales, 'Gender Construction in Early Modern England and the Conduct Books of William Whately (1583-1639)', in R.N. Swanson (ed.), *Gender and Christian religion*, *Studies in Church History* 34 (Woodbridge, 1998), p. 173.

⁸ Peter Du Moulin, *A Sermon Preach'd in St Martins Church ... at the Funeral of the Right Honourable Mabella Lady Fordwich* (1669), pp. 5, 9.

⁹ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, DCb/PRC44/3, **High Commission, Deposition of Marie Taylor against Katharine Horton** 9 April 1588.

¹⁰ See for example R. Baxter, *A Breviate of the Life of Margaret ... Wife of Richard Baxter* (1681), p. 101. For further background about the experiences of clergy wives in the period see Christobel Williams-Mitchell, 'The Wives of the Anglican Clergy and their place in society, 1550-1700', M.Phil. (2009), University of Chichester.

¹¹ Nathaniel Hardy, *Death's Alarum Or, Security's Warning Piece* (1654), p. 31. Mary Smith's father was Isaac Colfe, who had been vicar of Teynham in Kent at the time of her birth, see the Church of England Clergy Database <http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk>.

¹² Peter Lake, 'Feminine Piety and Personal Potency: the Emancipation of Mrs Ratcliffe', *Seventeenth Century*, 2 (1987), pp. 143-65; see also Jacqueline Eales, 'Samuel Clarke and the 'Lives' of Godly Women in Seventeenth-century England', in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds), *Women in the Church*, *Studies in Church History*, 27 (Oxford, 1990), pp. 365-376.

¹³ For help in prayer Peters specified the works of Richard Baxter, Jeremiah Burroughs, William Gurnal and William Bridge, and for keeping watch over his daughter's behaviour

he recommended Edward Reyner's *Precepts for Christian Practice: or the Rule of the New Creature*, John Brinsley the elder's *The True Watch and Rule of Life* and Hugh Peters', *A Dying Fathers Last Legacy to an Onely Child: Or Mr Hugh Peters advice to his Daughter* (1660), pp. 1-14.

¹⁴ For example, Brilliana, Lady Harley read French with greater ease than English and supervised her sons' English translations from Latin. Jacqueline Eales, *Puritans and Roundheads: The Harleys of Brampton Bryan and the Outbreak of the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 24, 29. Lucy Hutchinson also learned French and in Latin 'outstript' her brothers. She also made an elegant translation of Lucretius', *De Rerum Natura*, see Hugh de Quehen (ed.), *Lucy Hutchinson's Translation of Lucretius: De Rerum Natura* (London, 1996), p. 2.

¹⁵ Bodleian Library, Ballard Ms. 43 f. 59r-60r.

¹⁶ TNA, PROB11/101 f. 54r-v, 114 ff. 218v-220r, 133 f., 134 ff. 39v-40v, 143, f. 181r-v, 164, ff. 230v-231r, 180, ff. 290v-291r, 193 ff. 458v-460r, 213 ff. 20v-21r, 218, f. 13r-v, 217, ff. 355v-356v, 227, f. 110r-v, 233 f. 135r-v, 256 f. 135v-136r, 277 ff. 165r-167r, 308 ff. 108r-109r, 335 ff. 156v-157r, 361 f. 116r-v, 410 ff. 162v-164r.

¹⁷ TNA, PROB11/218 f. 13r-v.

¹⁸ TNA, PROB11/410 ff. 162v-164r.

¹⁹ Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England*, pp. 591-672.

²⁰ This research forms part of a wider study of women from seventeenth-century clerical families.

²¹ Samuel Bury, *An Account of the Life and Death of Mrs Elizabeth Bury* (1720).

²² W.W. Greg, *Licensers for the Press, &c. to 1640* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 85-6. The author is grateful to Mary Morrissey for this reference and for discussing this point with her.

²³ Barbara Lewalski, *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght* (Oxford, 1996), pp. ix-xiii.

²⁴ See note 16 above.

²⁵ Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 79-85.

²⁶ Patricia Crawford, 'Women's Published Writings, 1600-1700', in Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, pp. 232-264, 266.

²⁷ Thomas Parker, *The Copy of a Letter Written by Mr Thomas Parker* (1650), pp. A2, 13.

²⁸ Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth Century England* (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 95, 196. Mack has identified **only the authors Anne Downer, a Quaker leader, and Elizabeth Avery**, who was attracted to the Fifth Monarchists, as the daughters of ministers.

²⁹ J. B. Williams (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life and Character of Mrs Sarah Savage ... To which are added, Memoirs of the Life and Character of Mrs Anne Hulton and Mrs Eleanor Radford* (Philadelphia, undated). The author is grateful to Cathy Lawrence for sight of her family copy of Sarah Savage's manuscript of the lives of Anne and Eleanor, which appears to be in Sarah's own hand.

³⁰ Cheshire Record Office (hereinafter CRO), Z/D/Basten/8 Diary of Sarah Savage 1686-1688; Bodleian Ms Eng. Misc. e. 331 copy of Sarah Savage's diary from 1714-1723; Harris Manchester Savage Ms 4 copy of Sarah Savage's diary from 1724 to 1745 and Dr Williams's Library, Henry Ms 90.2 copy of Sarah Savage's diary for 1743-48. See also P. Crawford, 'Katherine and Philip Henry and their Children: a Case Study in Family Ideology' *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, Vol. 134 (1984), pp. 39-73.

³¹ CRO Z/D/Basten/8 ff. 1r-v, 3v, 8r, 4v, 9r.

³² CRO Z/D/Basten/8 ff. 4v, 10r, 23v. Private reading has been seen as the dominant early modern form, but as Andrew Cambers has argued, communal reading was also an important part of the godly sociability and the word based piety of evangelical households like that of the Henrys, A. Cambers, *Godly Reading: Print, Manuscript and Puritanism in England, 1580-1720* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 7-8. See also Andrew Cambers and Michelle Wolfe, 'Reading, Family Religion and Evangelical Identity in Late Stuart England', *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), pp. 875-96.

³³ Bodleian Library, Ballard Ms. 43 f. 59r-60r. For Elstob see Norma Clarke, 'Elizabeth Elstob (1674-1752): England's First Professional Woman Historian?', *Gender & History*, Vol. 17, No.1, April 2005, pp. 210-220; Richard Morton, 'Elizabeth Elstob's Rudiments of Grammar (1715): Germanic Philology for Women', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, Vol. 20, 1991, pp. 267-287; Leonie Hannan, 'Women, Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind in England c.1650-1750', PH.D. thesis, pp. 216-221, 248-252.

³⁴ Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England*, pp. 139-146; British Library, Add. Mss., 29300 ff. 39, 41 and 45511 f. 131.

³⁵ *An Essay Upon Glory Written Originally in French by the Celebrated Mademoiselle de Scudery Done into English by a Person of the same sex* (1708).

³⁶ Elizabeth Elstob, *An English-Saxon Homily on the Birth-day of St. Gregory* (1709), p. xiv, Epistle Dedicatory and pp. ii-iii.

³⁷ Yumi Hanashima, 'Encouragers Sought AND Gain'd for Elstob's *Anglo-Saxon Homily 1709: A Preliminary Study of the Subscription List and Female Subscribers*', http://www.flet.keio.ac.jp/~colloq/articles/backnumb/Col_21_HanashimaYumi.pdf

³⁸ F. Lieberman, 'Notes on the Textus Roffensis', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 23 (1898), 109-110.

³⁹ Elstob, *An English-Saxon Homily*, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁴⁰ British Library, Harl. Mss., 1866; BL Add. Mss., 4253 f. 63r.

⁴¹ *Calendar of Treasury Books: 1714*, Vol. 28 (1955), p. 280.

⁴² Elizabeth Elstob, *The Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (1715), The Dedication and pp. xvi-xxviii.

⁴³ Bodleian Library, Ballard Ms. 43, f. 72r.

⁴⁴ Bodleian Library, Ballard Ms. 43, ff. 3r-98r.

⁴⁵ University of Nottingham, Manuscripts and Special Collections, PwE8.

⁴⁶ Bodleian Library, Ballard Ms. 43, f. 5v; Elstob, *The Rudiments of Grammar*, pp. viii, xxxiv; BL Add. Mss. 29300 f40r.

⁴⁷ Elstob, *An English-Saxon Homily*, p. xiv.

⁴⁸ See Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England*.

⁴⁹ G. Stanhope, *A Sermon Preach'd in St. Paul's Cathedral* (1697), p. 10.