

**In Spirit More Than Flesh: Epistolary Codes, Friendship, and Social
Networks in 8th Century Women's Letters to St. Boniface**

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The last thing I have to say is, I'm about to spend a lot of pages trying to do a lot of analysis to these letters, but I also just love them. They are carefully constructed, complicated, and written with specific purposes in mind. But they are also so personal. It is such an incredible privilege to read what these people wrote. I sometimes wonder if any of them ever expected that they would be remembered for so long. If they knew the words of their letters would echo through millenia. That is what always draws me back to Latin. The chance to read the words of people long ago and maybe, just for a moment, reach out and try to know them. Even just a little. When Eangyth wrote "*...animarum nostrarum naviculae magnis miseriarum machinis et multifaria calamitatum quantitate quatiantur...*" [...the little boats of our souls are tossed about so strongly by great machines of miseries and so many various calamities...] she was talking about the troubles of her life, but I cannot help but imagine these letters as little boats of the soul that carry down a piece of people long gone.

Abstract

This thesis addresses the ways in which letters construct both the sender and recipient through formal characteristics such as epistolary codes and topoi as well as through the language of friendship and kinship. It looks specifically at a set of five letters from women living in monastic contexts in the 8th century in the British Isles written to St. Boniface. In reading these letters closely, the goal is to understand how these women interacted with the language of letter-writing and how analysis of their letters under the assumption of letters as a literary genre can help understand how they construct both themselves and Boniface. Letters provide a unique site for this type of analysis as they straddle the line of the private and public. They are extremely sensitive to social roles and thus provide ample room to understand how these women occupied their roles in life and exercised power and agency within the limits they lived by. I argue that, while they generally do not break with the epistolary and social roles assigned to them, the ways these women utilize the epistolary genre is highly sophisticated and they reveal (intentionally) a world in which they wield significant power and may participate in cultures of friendship that were often closed to women.

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Introduction

In pre-modern Europe, travel was possible but difficult. Great distance separated people, and when one person moved and another did not they could, perhaps, expect to be apart for months, years, or even a lifetime. Travelers and messengers bore letters great distances, and the written word became an essential source of connection. And for something so important and so common, it is no surprise that robust cultural expectations grew around the practice. Letters, in a sense, were their own form of communication, treated nominally as a stand-in for physical presence by some writers, but ultimately governed by its own rules.

Beyond the collapse of the Western Roman empire, the culture of letter-writing remained and evolved, continuing to connect people across distance. Christian writers inherited traditions from Rome and adapted them to changing conceptions of the world. Notably, letters were an essential way to both form and maintain friendships. Vast social networks could be maintained just by the sending of letters. Of course, only some of these letters survive. Of the Boniface Correspondence specifically, most surviving letters are without their exchanges. Instead, individual letters remain stripped of their context except for hints of the larger exchange. From these, the outline of a rich and vast network of letters can be glimpsed— if not fully understood.

This thesis is concerned primarily with five letters, all written by women to St. Boniface (also called Wynfrith) in the 8th century. In addition, a few letters from Boniface are also considered as comparisons and in order to give an impression of the full corpus of the Boniface Correspondence. All five letters are by nuns or abbesses living in the British Isles and they can all reasonably be said to be Anglo-Saxon (though brief investigation into their more specific origins are provided).¹ It is clear from correspondence from Boniface to other women, including

¹Lifshitz, Felice. "Women in the Anglo-Saxon Missionary Circles." In *A Companion to Boniface*. Brill, 2020, 70.

Abbess Eadburg, that he exchanged letters with more than these five whose writings to him survive.² The five whose letters are extant are Eangyth, Heaburg (called Bugga), Leobgytha, Cena, and Ecburg.

Section I will provide orientation to the letters and origins of the senders as well as brief introduction to epistolography, the study of letters. Section II looks into the models of letter-writing that make up the corpus from which these women could draw and the wider literary context they were situated in. Section III reads some of the letters to understand the use of epistolary codes in them. Section IV observes the theme of presence and absence throughout the letters. Section V expands from looking at formal codes to looking at how friendship is written in these letters, and Section VI steps back from the language of the letters to look at the social networks outlined in the letter and what can be understood about these women's lives and self-constructions from the relationships they discuss.

Very little information on these women survives, but we are privileged to have their own words, recorded in just a few manuscripts. By taking their writing seriously and examining the ways that they interact with larger cultures of letter-writing and the codes and language common to that corpus, I seek to understand the ways that they constructed both themselves and their interlocutor— Boniface— and what that may tell us about them.

Section I: Origins and Epistolography

Many others have worked to triangulate the origins of these women within the historical context of Anglo-Saxon England at the time. Particularly, Felice Lifshitz, Barbara Yorke, and Diane Watt have done work to place these women into historical context. Their work is

² Weston, Lisa M.C. "Where Textual Bodies Meet: Anglo-Saxon Women's Epistolary Friendships." In *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse*, Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2011, 232.

summarized briefly here to orient the time and place of these letters, but ultimately this thesis is not deeply concerned with historical particulars.

Eangyth was the abbess of a double house (a monastery containing both men and women)³, and she and her daughter Bugga have been identified as Kentish.⁴ They also have established ties to the royal line of Kent—it is not an uncommon theme for these women, important abbesses, to come from wealthy aristocratic families.⁵ Eangyth's letter, which is co-written (at least nominally) with her daughter Bugga, is dated to c. 719-722 CE.⁶ The Bugga who wrote a letter dated to c. 720 CE is thought to be that same Bugga who is Eangyth's daughter.⁷ Eangyth's letter does a number of things, but her concrete reason for writing is to ask to be allowed on a pilgrimage to Rome in opposition to synodal teachings on the subject of pilgrimage.

Leobgytha (also commonly called Leoba) is by far the most well known of the five women, being a well-known associate of Boniface who went on to be a missionary in Germany with him.⁸ She states herself to be related to Boniface via her mother.⁹ Later on, she would become a very important part of Boniface's mission and the abbess of Tauberbischofsheim.¹⁰ Her letter is dated to c. 732 CE, making it likely the latest (although Cena's letter, being the shortest, has extremely uncertain dating, anywhere from c.723-755 CE and so could be later).¹¹ Leoba is

³ "...*universarum commissarum animarum promiscui sexus et aetatis...*" [of all the joined souls of both sexes and many ages] Eangyth, *A Letter to Boniface c. 719-22*. ed. *The Cambridge Anthology of British Medieval Latin Volume 1 450-1066*

⁴ Yorke, Barbara. "The Bonifacian Mission and Female Religious in Wessex." *Early Medieval Europe* 7, no. 2 (1998), 149.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Watt, Diane. "Missionary Women's Letters and Poetry." In *Women, Writing and Religion in England and beyond, 650-1100*. Studies in Early Medieval History. London ; Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 70.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Yorke. "The Bonifacian Mission and Female Religious in Wessex," 149.

⁹ Leoba, *A Letter to Boniface c. 732*. ed. *The Cambridge Anthology of British Medieval Latin Volume 1 450-1066*

¹⁰ Yorke. "The Bonifacian Mission and Female Religious in Wessex," 149.

¹¹ Watt, "Missionary Women's Letters and Poetry," 70.

now recognized as a saint, and she had a *Vita* written about her by Rudolf of Fulda after her death.¹²

Ecburg's is the earliest letter, dated to c. 716-718 CE.¹³ Her specific origins are significantly debated, but Yorke localizes her to Glastonbury and thus identifies her as West Saxon using the post-script attached to her letter.¹⁴ She was an abbess and likely related to the nobility of the area, similar to Eangyth and Bugga.¹⁵

Boniface himself was born Wynfrith and was given to the Exeter monastery as a young child.¹⁶ He stayed there and at a monastery called Nursling for much of his life, becoming fairly well-known.¹⁷ He eventually set off in 716 CE to proselytize in areas of what is now Germany (Frankia and Frisia), which is what he is by far most remembered for.¹⁸ The most important detail of his life for understanding these letters is the timeline. He began his mission in 716 CE and was ordained a bishop in 722 CE.¹⁹ In the late 720s-30s CE he also established a number of abbeys, which were filled with Anglo-Saxon nuns from the British Isles.²⁰ He eventually died in 754 CE, said to have been attacked and killed while confirming recently baptized Christian converts; this death made him into a martyr and, eventually, a saint.²¹

All of these women have debates about their origins, who they were or were not related to, et al. This is in large part because these letters are nearly all we have for most of them, exempting Leoba. Brilliant historians have tried to piece their lives together, as all the cited

¹² Yorke. "The Bonifacian Mission and Female Religious in Wessex," 149.

¹³ Watt, "Missionary Women's Letters and Poetry," 70.

¹⁴ Yorke. "The Bonifacian Mission and Female Religious in Wessex," 155.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Schieffer, Rudolf. "Boniface: His Life and Work." In *A Companion to Boniface*, 92. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition. Brill, 2020, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

sources indicate, but we ultimately can only know what they wrote. What is perhaps most important to understand about their origins is that they all seem to come from relatively privileged economic backgrounds, and they are all living in female monastic contexts (or double houses) in Anglo-Saxon England. Within the spheres of their abbeys, they wield significant power, but women were disadvantaged socially and religiously, generally relegated to roles subservient to men on some level. Virginité was a high ideal for women of the time, evidenced by texts like Aldhelm's *De Virginitate*— a text about the virtues of virginité written for a group of nuns. Nonetheless, women were literate, as will be discussed more in Section II.

In addition, women's writing from this time is not at all common, so what we do have is a valuable insight into lives otherwise obscured.²² So, reading their letters carefully is of the utmost importance to understanding. The study of letters—epistolography— is a somewhat slippery discipline. Jennifer Ebbeler, one of the foremost scholars of epistolography in Latin, says:

“...letters are resistant to formal modes of generic analysis. Letters can be composed in prose or a variety of metres (or, occasionally, a mixture of both); they can handle an enormous range of themes; authorship was not limited to any class of people; letters can range in length from one sentence to dozens of pages”²³

Letters, therefore, are a very heterogeneous genre that can sometimes be difficult to define.

While many things lie at the margins, all five of these women's writings fall fairly obviously into the genre of “letter.” Ebbeler points out that, in both Classical times and Late Antiquity, *epistulae* was a meaningful generic label used by writers to define their own writing.²⁴ It remained a form

²² Watt, “Missionary Women's Letters and Poetry,” 69.

²³ Ebbeler, Jennifer. “Letters.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, edited by Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel, 0. Oxford University Press, 2010, 465.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 466.

governed by particular codes, and ancient authors regularly defined and negotiated the bounds of what the form and content of a letter could be.²⁵

Ebbeler also points out that letters often toe the line between public and private.²⁶ While they might be written to a single recipient, letters, particularly ancient ones, were often collected by their authors and published.²⁷ So, even a letter to a friend might be understood to be public. These 8th century CE letters occupy a different cultural milieu, but are still subject to the same differing ideas of public and private. Even beyond the possibility that these letters might have been read aloud, they had to pass through many hands to get from Kent or Wessex to Boniface. Despite some apparent level of privacy²⁸ the level to which these letters occupy the place of a “performance” or a conscious self-construction conditioned both by social identity and the codes particular to letter-writing cannot be overstated.

Epistolary codes—the generic conventions by which writers were expected to abide—were of the utmost importance. When broken, it has been pointed out that immense upset could be caused and rifts in communication could easily form when correspondents had different ideas about the roles one should play.²⁹ The various “purposes” of letters is also essential to what a letter seeks to do. By the 8th century in the Christian context, a number of distinctive letter-types had formed. Boniface’s letters might be most easily characterized as “episcopal letters” from a bishop offering advice to religious women lower in the hierarchy than him.³⁰ They could also be

²⁵ Ibid, 469.

²⁶ Ibid, 465.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ All these letters were eventually recorded in manuscripts chronicling Boniface’s correspondence but do not appear to have been published by the senders or recipients themselves.

²⁹ Ebbeler, Jennifer. “Mixed Messages: The Play of Epistolary Codes in Two Late Antique Latin Correspondences.” In *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, edited by Ruth Morello and A. D. Morrison, 0. Oxford University Press, 2007.

³⁰ Neil, Bronwen, and Pauline Allen, eds. “Letter-Types and Their Uses.” In *Greek and Latin Letters in Late Antiquity: The Christianisation of a Literary Form*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 37.

interpreted as monastic or pastoral, since advice is one of the central things that Boniface seeks to offer, and it is what the women are often asking for.³¹

However, the five women's letters are not simple to characterize. Although they adhere tightly to the conventions of humility, flattery, and the roles assigned to these women by social and religious hierarchy, they are also perhaps best seen as friendship letters, a genre that goes back to Cicero and before.³² The women make extensive use of language regarding humility and flattery, and they also deploy language of friendship and kinship to characterize their relationships to Boniface.

In these letters, it is possible to read the complex self-construction and construction of recipients inherent in letter-writing. By looking closely at how these five women write themselves and Boniface— as well as how Boniface responds— it is clear how these women both wield and obfuscate power, as well as how they view friendship and kinship within the social networks they occupy. And, beyond the text itself, they offer small windows into the world of these women viewed through the lens of the networks that letters facilitated. While far from Boniface and his mission, these women living in abbeys in Kent and Wessex maintained large social networks through the practice of letter writing, and their letters reveal complex self-constructions and sophisticated conceptions of their recipient and world.

Section II: Epistolary Models and Women's Literacies

While this thesis will not focus intensely on history, the models which make up the basis for these letters and the wider culture of letter writing are important for forming the backbone of analysis. As discussed in Section I, cultures of letter-writing in the Roman world extend back

³¹ *Ibid*, 87.

³² Ebbeler. "Letters," 469.

quite far. Individual letters from the Republic survive, but it is not until the late Republic, Ebbeler contends, that people began collecting their own letters to be published (and thus many more letters survive).³³ Notable collections include Cicero, Horace, and later Seneca, Pliny, Fronto, and Marcus Aurelius.³⁴

Late Antiquity also contains a large number of letter collections by Christian authors including Jerome, Augustine, Symmachus, Paulinus, and many others.³⁵ All these letter collections must be considered as possible wells from which these women could be drawing. While the Christian letter collections are more immediate, we also know that these women had access to Classical texts. Eangyth quotes *De Amicitia*, and Ecburg paraphrases the *Aeneid*, so it is entirely possible that they have some access to these collections as well. Therefore, the full range of epistolary codes and topoi are open to them, and the weight of the history of letters was well-known to these writers.

In addition, it is commonly known that monks acted as scribes and therefore were highly literate, but nuns as well, played a role in copying texts. Evidence for women's literacies can be harder to detect, but there are manuscripts surviving that come from women's abbeys. While most of the evidence dates later than the 8th century (a large number of the surviving manuscripts come from much later), it is obvious that women religious had access to an array of reading material.³⁶

Of course, the largest portion of texts are Biblical and liturgical in nature. Gospels, Books of Hours, and Psalters make up a huge portion of the surviving texts.³⁷ These letters are themselves evidence of women's literacies in Latin in this time period. Latin was unlikely to be

³³ Ibid, 467.

³⁴ Ibid, 467-468.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Bell, David N. *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries*. Cistercian Studies Series ; No. 158. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995, 34.

³⁷ Ibid.

the first language of these West Saxon and Kentish women who all have Old English names. Instead, they learned Latin as a literary and liturgical language, and they all are very well read in Biblical literature. There is also evidence, historically, for women as scribes and illuminators, discussed much more extensively in Felice Lifshitz's "Women in Anglo Saxon Missionary Circles." In addition, a comprehensive index of manuscripts recovered from women's monastic contexts is available in David N. Bell's *What Nuns Read: Books & Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries*.

The Bible will always be the forefront of references for these women, but it is not the only text. Given the evidence, it is important to understand these women as highly literate, educated in a variety of texts, and part of communities of learning and textual production deeply embedded in the history of Latin traditions.

Section III: Humility and Flattery

The structure of letters was fairly formalized, particularly in the openings which, in Latin, follow a standardized structure. Following conventional grammar, the recipient is referred to in the dative, the sender in the nominative, and the greeting is in the accusative. There is generally no verb, with "salutem" being sufficient to mean "sends greetings." This structure, common to all five of these letters in addition to most Latin letters, allows for letter writers to make visible choices within the standardized structure.

The letter opening is also a locus for the expression of humility and flattery, a central concept to letters. Christian letters in particular adhered to strict norms of humility that reflected wider Christian values.³⁸ Flattery in this context necessarily exists as the opposite of humility. If

³⁸ Neil, Bronwen, and Pauline Allen, eds. "The Christianisation of the Late Antique Letter-Form." In *Greek and Latin Letters in Late Antiquity: The Christianisation of a Literary Form*, 24–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 42.

one is humble, then the person you are speaking to is likely to be the subject of flattery. This theme of humility/flattery recurs in letters to the extent of being considered an epistolary code or *topoi*. It was expected that the sender would humble themselves and flatter the recipient in most cases. The performative assumption of identities of servitude and even enslavement were common and can be seen in all five of these letters, as well as some from Boniface back to the women. Within this space of formality and expectation, every decision in wording becomes important. The opening of a letter is the first opportunity to lay out the roles the sender and recipient will play and thus set the stage for correspondence.

The openings of these letters use particular words, often those historically associated with enslavement but that have also become associated with biblical passages. Bugga, Eangyth, and Leoba all reference such models, but Ecburg and Cena do not— revealing both options as conscious choices rather than adherence to convention. Knowing this, the words these women use to describe themselves and Boniface take on special meaning as they play within the convention of humility/flattery to create specific characterizations of each sender and their recipient.

Bugga's letter opens:

“Venerando dei famulo et plurimis spiritalium carismatum ornamentis praedito Bonifatio sive Wynfritho dignissimo dei presbitero Bugga vilis vernacula perpetuae caritatis salutem.”

[To Boniface, venerable servant of god and endowed with many ornaments of spiritual gifts, or to Wynfrith, most dignified priest of god, Bugga, base housemaid sends greetings of perpetual affection]^{39 40}

³⁹ Bugga, *A Letter to Boniface c. 720*. dd. Tangl, *MGH, Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, 6, *S.Bonifacii et Lulli Epistolae*, ep. 15.

⁴⁰ All translations are my own

The convention of humility and flattery is on full display here, with praise heaped on Boniface (also referred to as Wynfrith), and Bugga demeaning herself. She chooses the words *vilis vernacula*. *Vernacula* is a rare diminutive of *verna*⁴¹, meaning an enslaved person born into enslavement. *Vernacula* is a specifically late Latin diminutive⁴² that retained its meaning related to enslavement. *Vernacula* does not appear in the Bible. However, the masculine *vernaculus*, does appear a number of times, primarily in Genesis⁴³, and all instances appear to refer to enslaved people born in someone's household.

Leoba's letter echoes similar choices in language:

“Domino reverentissimo et summe dignitatis infula predito Bonifatio atque in Christo carissimo et mihi adfinitatis propinquitate conexo Leobgytha, ultima leve iugum Christi portantium famula, perennem sospitatis salutem.”

[To the most revered master Boniface, endowed with the emblem of highest merit and most beloved in Christ and connected to me by nearness of kinship, Leoba, last servant of those who bear the light yoke of Christ, sends continual greetings of salvation.]⁴⁴

She calls herself *ultima famula*, a similar sentiment to Bugga's, but with less connection to slavery than *vernacula*. Bugga uses *famulus* to refer to Boniface himself (*venerando dei famulo*) in her letter opening. The word can mean slave⁴⁵, but here it evidently takes on the dimension of servitude to the Lord in addition to earthly service, since Leoba explicitly connects it to the *iugum Christi*. In terms of Biblical attestation, *famula* is similar to *vernacula*, appearing exclusively in the Old Testament, but it is more common. From Leoba's example, it becomes

⁴¹ Lewis, Charleton, and Charles Short. "Vernacula, Ae f." In *A Latin Dictionary*, n.d.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Genesis 14:14, Genesis 15:3, Genesis 17:12, Genesis 17:23, Genesis 17:27, Leviticus 22:17, Ieramas 2:14

⁴⁴ Leoba, *A Letter to Boniface c. 732*.

⁴⁵ Lewis, Charleton, and Charles Short. "Famula, Ae f." In *A Latin Dictionary*, n.d.

clear that the language of enslavement connects to being a servant of Christ in addition to the actual practice of slavery.

This is also borne out by Eangyth's letter:

...Eangyth, indigna ancilla ancillarum dei et nomine abbatissae sine merito functa...in sancta trinitate aeternam salutem.

[Eangyth, unworthy servant among servants of god who has attained the name of abbess without merit...sends eternal greetings in the holy trinity]⁴⁶

Eangyth calls herself *ancilla ancillarum*. Classically, *ancilla* refers to enslaved women, and thus carries a powerful tone of submission. However, it is also a biblical word, appearing numerous times in both the Old and New Testament. Most strikingly for a Christian woman, Mary says “*Ecce ancilla Domini*” [Behold, I am the Lord's servant/slave]⁴⁷. In addition, in the 8th century, the word had come to also mean “maidservant, nun, maiden”⁴⁸. So, while the connotations of slavery have not been entirely lost (we know these women had contact with Classical texts), Eangyth's use of *ancilla* deploys two images.

She is both poor servant or slave, one among many (despite, in fact, being an abbess), humble in her task. But she also places herself in proximity to the the Virgin Mary, an exemplar of the virgin ideal for women at this time⁴⁹. She does not say it outright, as that might compromise the ideal of humility present in both letters and Mary's own statement. She constructs herself as the ideal virgin— an image perhaps even more important given that she

⁴⁶ Eangyth, *A Letter to Boniface c. 719-22*

⁴⁷ Luke 1:38

⁴⁸ “Ancilla, Ae. f.” In *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, n.d.

⁴⁹ Hollis, Stephanie. *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate*. Woodbridge, Suffolk [UK]; Boydell Press, 1992.

seems to have been a widow, and that she has a daughter (Bugga) and thus is not a lifelong virgin.

The two other senders, Ecburg and Cena, do not use explicit language of servitude and enslavement, though both also follow the humility topos in their opening lines. Ecburg writes “...*Egiburg ultima discipulorum seu discipularum tuarum aeternam in domino sospitatis salutem.*” [Ecburg, worst of your male or female students sends eternal greetings of safety in God.]⁵⁰ Calling herself *ultima discipulorum seu discipularum*, her humility takes the form of a poor student or someone in need of learning. This role is not dissimilar to Bugga, Leoba, and Eangyth. All the women adopt subservient roles— unsurprising in the context of a strict convention for humility. However, Ecburg’s wording is that of a student, casting herself in that role and Boniface, then, as teacher. This also has Biblical roots; *discipulus* is used to refer to followers of Jesus (and it is the root for the modern English “disciple”).⁵¹ A student/teacher relationship was also a well-established set of roles for an epistolary exchange to encompass.⁵²

Cena as well simply says “*Venerando pontifici Bonifatio Christi amatori Cenei indigna salutem.*” [To the venerable priest Boniface, lover of Christ, unworthy Cena sends greetings.]⁵³ Her letter is by far the briefest, so it is not surprising that her introduction is short. Together, Ecburg and Cena demonstrate alternative ways to approach the humility topos, giving all five women’s decision on how to approach their self-introductions more weight.

The surface purpose of all the introductions is clear: to adhere to the requirement of humility. However, the choice of the language of enslavement by Bugga, Leoba, and Eangyth serves the additional purpose both of affirming piety by invoking Biblical images of servitude to

⁵⁰ Ecburg, *A Letter to Boniface c.716-18*. Tangl, *MGH, Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, 6, *S.Bonifacii et Lulli Epistolae*, ep.13.

⁵¹ Matthew 27:57, Luke 14:26, et al.

⁵² Niel & Allen, “Letter Types and Their Uses” 120.

⁵³ Cena, *A Letter to Boniface c. 723-55*. Tangl, *MGH, Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, 6, *S.Bonifacii et Lulli Epistolae*, ep.97

Christ, and of initiating the roles of sender and recipient. These words become the roles each person is cast in, marking out how an exchange might develop. Eangyth's choice of *ancilla* in particular grounds her both in the historical language of servitude and in the Biblical language of female faith. It is also the most strongly gendered of the words, having no direct masculine equivalent.

While no direct exchanges survive, some of Boniface's letters back to these women do survive, and with them a valuable comparison: how Boniface characterizes himself. In one of two letters to Leoba his opening reads:

“Venerande Christi famule et caritate sincerissima perenniter continendae Leobgythae Bonifatius servus servorum Dei optabilem in Christo salutem.”

[To the venerable maidservant of Christ, Leoba, being held everlastingly in sincerest love Boniface, servant of the servants of God sends longed-for greetings in Christ.]⁵⁴

Similar to how Bugga greets Boniface (*Venerando dei famulo*), Boniface greets Leoba with a very similar expression. Though this letter is not a direct response to Leoba's extant letter to him, it also echoes how she describes herself (also as a *famula*). This word, even just within these letters, has become strongly associated with Christian service to God. Also, Boniface calls himself *servus servorum*. By this point, *servus* could encompass a variety of meanings, including slave, servant, monk, serf, and attendant.⁵⁵ It is also a term very common in the Bible, including both the Old and New Testament and is used to refer both to earthly servitude and service to God.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Leoba, *A Letter to Boniface c. 732*.

⁵⁵ “Servus, -i m.” In *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, n.d.

⁵⁶ Genesis 9:25 (servus servorum), Genesis 43:28, Matthew 24:46, Luke 16:13, et al.

Boniface's turn of phrase echoes Eangyth's *ancilla ancillarum* and paints a similar picture, though perhaps not with as close a Biblical reference (Genesis 9:25 contains the phrase *servus servorum* but is not nearly as compelling a reference as Mary in the Gospels). Nonetheless, the similarities between Boniface's language and that of the women suggest that the language of enslavement, while deployed by the women, was not exclusive to them or particularly indicative of a gendered tradition. The words do take on a different meaning when used by Boniface, a man who is a well-known priest and missionary, who has significantly more power. Boniface also does not always refer to the women he writes to the same way (i.e. mirroring words like *famula*, et al.). In another letter that he wrote to Bugga, he says:

“Dominae dilectissimae et in amore Christi omnibus ceteris femini sexus preferendae sorori Buggan abbatissae Bonifacius exiguus, indignus episcopus, aeternam in Christo salutem.”

[To the most loved mistress and preferred in the love of Christ to all others of the female sex, sister and abbess Bugga, poor Boniface, unworthy bishop, sends eternal greeting in Christ.]⁵⁷

Far from referring to Bugga using servile language, Boniface calls her *domina*. This echoes Leoba's reference to Boniface as *domino*. The masculine form can appear both referring to earthly men (as with Boniface), but it can also refer directly to God⁵⁸, making it a powerful indication of spiritual authority as well as a conventional term for someone of high status. Boniface's choice to refer to Bugga as *dominae*, similar to Leoba's choice to refer to Boniface *domino*, reflects a hierarchical construction. In Leoba's case, it is a relationship wherein she is a servant (*famula*) and Boniface a master. He is not only being flattered, but also being granted authority explicitly. Boniface, on the other hand, uses his title— *episcopus*— to refer to himself

⁵⁷ Boniface, *A Letter to Bugga c. 738*.

⁵⁸ “...in domino sospitatis salutem” (Ecburg, introduction)

(albeit modified by *indignus*), reminding his recipient of his ecclesiastical authority. The relationship is still hierarchical, but it stays on Boniface's side. While he flatters Bugga as is appropriate to the context and performs humility, the relationship does not enter as uneven a territory. This is also the case in his letter to Leoba. They are both servants (*famula* or *servus*). Unlike the women, Boniface is keeping himself on even footing. He does not attempt to construct himself as subservient in the same way the women generally do.

The language of humility and flattery are not restricted to letter openings, but become increasingly entwined with the language of friendship as the letters continue. The conventions of flattery cannot be fully disentangled from the language of friendship within the letters because both contribute to how the senders characterize Boniface. They construct both their own role and the role of their recipient, writing the archetype that they want the recipient to perform. While all the women do this, Eangyth's letter is a good study as it is the longest and she has a very clear goal for her letter— she wants to be granted the right to go on a pilgrimage. Her letter therefore has stakes and a very particular role that she wants to cast Boniface in. He is the wise church father and dear friend who will grant her wish despite a synodal opinion which discourages pilgrimage.⁵⁹

Eangyth begins her letter by gesturing to an existing letter exchange between her and Boniface of which her letter is all we have left. Then, after this brief formal gesture to the existing exchange, she says: “...*ibi soli indicare volumus et Deus solus testis est nobis, quas*

⁵⁹“...*quod canones synodales praecipiant, ut unusquisque in eo loco, ubi constitutus fuerit et ubi votum suum voverit, ibi maneat et ibi Deo reddat vota sua...*” [which the synodal canons say before, that in one single place, where one is born, and where one takes one's vows, there one ought to remain and give back to god with their religious vow...]. Eangyth, *letter to Boniface c. 719-722*.

cernis interlitas lacrimis...” [we wished to reveal to you alone and God alone is our witness, that whom you see [here] stained with tears...].⁶⁰ Boniface becomes her only confidant, beside God.⁶¹

This is certainly flattery intended to reaffirm an existing relationship, since they have already exchanged letters. Being her only confidant (to something so personal that it is stained with tears) makes Boniface into both a trusted authority and a dear friend. Eangyth continues to speak of Boniface in a similar way— using a combination of flattery and friendship to construct him within the letter.

She also uses more subtle ways to reinforce the relationship she has built with Boniface. In the second paragraph of her letter, she gives an extended simile comparing her difficulties to a storm. At the end of it, she says, “...dicitur: “*descendit pluvia, venerunt flumina, flaverunt venti et inpegerunt in domum illam...*” *et reliqua.*” [it is said: the rain fell, waters came, the winds blew and struck that house...” and the rest.]. This Biblical quotation, Matthew 7:25-27, is one of many that appear. However, it is notable in that she only begins the verse, leaving the end (which is actually necessary for getting the full meaning— only the house built on sand will be destroyed, while the one built on solid foundations will endure). It demonstrates her command of the Bible to Boniface and implies that Boniface would have the knowledge to interpret it (which is a given. He is a missionary bishop in the business of teaching the Bible). However, what is important is not how obvious it is, but that she makes it clear that *she* knows how obvious it is. It is a compliment to Boniface and a way to draw the two closer in terms of a shared experience of knowledge of biblical verses and important teachings.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Her daughter, Bugga, is also an implicit confidant, being technically a co-composer of the letter. Eangyth also later mentions that her former abbess Wala was aware of her desire, so Boniface is not, in reality, the only confidant. But Eangyth nonetheless wishes to paint him as such.

Eangyth is by no means helpless nor an *ancilla* in the earthly sense of the term. She is an abbess from a wealthy family— in charge of both men and women in her abbey. Her troubles are not to be discounted, of course, but her letter is also calculated to be convincing. She does occupy a station below Boniface, and that is evident in her portrayal of herself. At the same time, she seeks Boniface’s counsel with confidence and even begins her letter with a (subtle) reference to the Virgin Mary— no small thing to claim for herself. She casts herself in the role of both supplicant asking for the advice of a respected bishop and as knowledgeable and pious woman (and she does cast herself strongly as a woman in her use of gendered language) and thus, perhaps, deserving of her pilgrimage.

Section IV: Presence/Absence

Letters were essential communication across distance— a way for people who could not see each other in person to communicate. Naturally, a negotiation of how written words do or do not replace physical presence and conversation becomes a central theme of letters. Can words— perhaps autograph but also perhaps recorded by a scribe— render a person present in some metaphorical or spiritual way? Or will the letter always be secondary to seeing someone?

The idea that the act of reading a written letter could render the distant writer present was a well-established idea from Classical writers like Cicero and Seneca and was adapted by Christian writers.⁶² We know from Eangyth’s reference to *De Amicitia* by Cicero that she was familiar with at least that work, and very possibly some of his other well-known work, including his letter collections. It has also been argued by Janina Cunnun that Eangyth’s letter is receiving and adapting Augustine’s models of friendship as well.⁶³ While this is only one of the five

⁶² Neil & Allen, “The Christianisation of the Late Antique Letter-Form,” 35-37

⁶³ Cunnun, Janina. “Amicitia in Old English Letters: Augustine’s Ideas of ‘Friendship’ and Their Reception in Eangyth’s Letter to Boniface.” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, November 1, 1997.

women, it is clear that others of them were also reading Classical texts and adopting Classical models to their needs. Leoba writes poetry in hexameter⁶⁴ and Ecburg retools a line of the Aeneid.⁶⁵ These women were familiar both with Classical authors and more contemporary authors and entirely willing and able to

Ecburg in particular focuses on presence and absence. Her letter is acutely concerned with the absence of multiple people from her life; her brother Osbere has died, and her sister Wethburg has gone to Rome to become a cloistered nun and is thus out of contact.⁶⁶ It is on this stage that Ecburg sets her letter. She begins with a typical greeting, and then immediately moves to discuss presence and absence, writing “*Et licet interim, ut nancta sum, ab aspectu corporali visualiter defraudata sim, sororis tamen semper amplexibus collum tuum constrinxero.*” [and though for a time, just as I had obtained it, from sight of your body I am deprived, I always nevertheless clasp your neck in sisterly entwining].⁶⁷ She dives directly into the idea that Boniface’s physical absence is something painful and difficult for her bear, and she seeks to, across distance, continue to hold him in an embrace. The letter thus, as the only form of communication, becomes the embrace she wishes to entwine Boniface with.

She continues on to speak about the death of her brother, Osbere. She says, “*...a me separavit amara mors et crudelis illum, quem supra omnes alios amare consueveram, germanum meum Osberem,*” [cruel and bitter death separated him— my brother Osbere, whom I was

⁶⁴ Leoba, *Letter to Boniface c. 732*

⁶⁵ “*...ubique pavor et plurima mortis imago*” (Aeneid 2.369) to “*...ubique dolor, ubique pavor, ubique mortis imago.*” (Ecburg)

⁶⁶ Ecburg describes her sister as “*ut audio, Romana carcer includit*” [as I here, a Roman cell encloses her]. This indicates that she has gone to Rome and become a cloistered nun (rather than gone to jail, as she is described further later, making it clear that she is a recluse and not a prisoner). Cloistered nuns, also called contemplatives or recluses, are women religious who go into voluntary isolation for the purposes of religious contemplation and prayer. They generally have little to no contact with the outside world and live in communities with other cloistered nuns. They often have no communication even with family and friends.

⁶⁷ Ecburg, *A Letter to Boniface c. 716-18.*

accustomed to love more than all others— from me.].⁶⁸ The language she uses here is not unusual for the subject matter, but the use of “*separavit*”, indicating her separation from her brother, becomes important when compared with how she speaks about her sister. Her brother has been separated by *amara mors*. Ecburg moves relatively quickly to then speak about her sister, Wethburg, who has gone to Rome to become a cloistered nun and thus is out of contact. This takes up a larger portion of the letter.

The way that Ecburg describes the absence of her sister is:

Et postquam mihi simul carissima soror Wethburg...subito ab oculis evanuit, cum qua adolevi, cum qua adoravi idem nutricum sinus...ubique dolor, ubique pavor, ubique mortis imago. Malui mori, si sic Deo auspice, cui arcana non latent, placuisset, vel tarda Mors non tricaverit. Sed quid dicam nunc?...non amara mors, sed amarior divisio separavit ab invicem; illam, ut reor, felicem; me vero infelicem...

[And afterwards, nearly at the same time, my sister Wethburg...suddenly disappeared from my eyes, she whom I grew up with, with whom I suckled at the same breast...everywhere pain, everywhere fear, everywhere the specter of death. I preferred to die, if it were pleasing to God, the auspex, from whom no secret lies hidden, or if slow death had not tricked me. But what should I say now?...it was not bitter death, but even more bitter division which separated us by turns, leaving her happy—so I believe—and me truly unhappy...]⁶⁹

Both the language and the ordering of this passage reveal how Ecburg conceptualizes absence as pain. She has already spoken of one family death in this letter, so when she begins her passage about Wethburg by saying that she has “*ab oculis evanuit*” it initially seems as if Wethburg too is dead. This reading is only heightened by the intense emotional descriptors that Ecburg then uses, including her reference to book two of the Aeneid. The line she is picking from (2.369) is describing the emotional landscape of Troy as it is destroyed and the dead lay all around. She also indicates that whatever has happened to Wethburg is so painful that she “*Malui mori*” [preferred to die]. She builds this description as if she is going to speak about another death.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Instead she writes “*non amara mors sed amarior divisio separavit...*” [not bitter death but even more bitter division separated [us]]. After constructing this extreme state of grief, she reveals that Wethburg is, in fact, alive, but is absent, building on that idea as she had set it up earlier when speaking directly to Boniface. She also draws a comparison between her brother and her sister. Previously, she had described Osbere’s death as “*amara mors.*” In choosing to use this exact phrasing again she compares Osbere’s death to Wethburg’s absence and judges the latter to be more bitter. She also uses “*separavit*” in both cases, which keeps the theme of separation and absence close to the surface and strengthens the comparison between the two.

When Ecburg chooses to portray Wethburg’s absence as more painful than Osbere’s death, she is not just comparing the two relationships. Because she is writing within the context of the larger epistolary tradition, and because she has already set up presence and absence as a theme, she is making a statement specifically about the nature of absence. The absence of a living person is more serious than death. Both are separated from her, but division between living people is more painful than death. Since her sister became a cloistered nun, she is totally out of contact, it seems.⁷⁰ This is also indicated by “*ut audio*” which is a vague statement indicating that it is possible the Ecburg heard not from her sister, but from some other person traveling or writing back. So, division takes on the additional dimension of a lack of letter exchange. Without an exchange of letters, these two women are truly cut off from each other, being a continent apart. To Ecburg, though she knows her sister is alive, in terms of communication she is as good as dead. There are no words to stand in for her presence, so she cannot be connected spiritually in the same way Ecburg connects to Boniface through letter exchange.

⁷⁰ Boniface does mention a “Wiethburga” in a letter to Bugga c. 738 who is cloistered at the shrine of St. Peter. This may well be the same Wethburg whom Ecburg refers to (name spellings were often not standardized). So, it is possible that she did have some communication, but Ecburg nonetheless does not represent it this way in her letter, regardless of possible realities (Boniface, *A Letter to Bugga c. 738*, ed. Tangl. *MGH, Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, 6, S. *Bonifacii et Lulli Epistolae*, ep. 27.).

This construction of absence lends additional weight to her second to last sentence as well: “*Similiter supplex rogo, ut mihi aliquod solacium vel in reliquiis sanctis vel paucula saltem per scripta beatitudinis tue verba distinare digneris, ut in illis tuam praesentiam semper habeam.*” [Similarly I ask you as a suppliant, that you might deign to send some solace, a holy relic or at least some few written words of your learnedness, so that I might have you present in them].⁷¹ Ecburg spells out her desire for Boniface’s written words (a letter) in return explicitly. It is, in fact, the primary purpose of her letter. These final few lines are often for summarizing a request, so this is what she most wants. She is explicit about presence as well, actually using the noun *praesentia* to describe the effect that Boniface’s words would have. They would render him present with her.

This request is on the tail of all the groundwork she has laid in her letter about presence and absence. She has made it clear that the absence of living people, particularly when they are not able to write, is most painful for her, so Boniface’s words become essential, lest he be rendered as good as dead. Ecburg leverages this common trope, which Boniface too would have been aware of, to express her grief. It is also part of what her letter is. Instead of asking for something specific, the way that Eangyth is, Ecburg’s letter is better characterized as a friendship letter, intended to maintain bonds over distance. In that context, and intense focus on the way that words stand in for a person make perfect sense.

Cena, to, is concerned with absence from Boniface and the ways in which her letter can or cannot substitute for presence. Her letter is significantly shorter than Ecburg’s, but the line immediately following Cena’s short greeting is “*Iam fateor tibi, carissime, quia licet, te corporalibus oculis raro intueor, quod te tamen spiritalibus cordis luminibus iugiter aspicere non cesso.*” [Now I confess to you, most beloved, because although I look at you with corporeal eyes

⁷¹ Ecburg, *A Letter to Boniface c. 716-18*

rarely, nevertheless I never cease to gaze upon you with the spiritual lights (eyes) of my heart.]. In this case, she does not use her letter as a stand-in for presence as such, but instead invokes the idea of a spiritual, non-physical presence that she can have, perhaps through religious connection with Boniface. The letter, as a means of distance communication, does come to be a facilitator of that spiritual connection. Ecburg's letter can be read the same way, if the "sisterly embrace" from her first line is properly understood to be the type of spiritual friendship that these women often focus on (discussed further in section IV)

Cena's letter, generally, is less eager to ask for responses from Boniface, being one more about offering her services and prayer. She indicates that she hopes, through her prayer and service, that she might find salvation and that Boniface might keep her in his mind as well. This seems to be the connection she is hoping for— one that is primarily spiritual, but which is to be facilitated by the exchange of letters. And, in fact, the exchange of letters seems to be in some way connected to her spiritual connection to Boniface, as she mentions "*parva manuscula*" which she is sending to Boniface. These may be literal gifts, but they may also be the prayers as well as the letter she is sending. Within these letters, the themes of presence and absence then intertwine with humility, flattery, and, very deeply, with the language of friendship.

Section IV: The Language of Friendship

Amicitia, -ae f.: friendship, amity, friendly settlement (legal)⁷²

Caritas, caritatis f.: love, charity, Christian love (DMLBS)⁷³

Amicitia and *caritas* are two words that can both be translated as "friendship." However, they come (like all synonyms) with their own sets of baggage and connotation. *Amicitia* is a

⁷²"*Amicitia*, -ae f." In *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*. Brepolis, n.d.

⁷³"*Caritas*, Caritatis f." In *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*. Brepolis, n.d.

word familiar from Classical Latin and such works as *De Amicitia* (Cicero). *Caritas* also exists in Classical Latin, but it becomes more associated with friendship in later Christian Latin, where it takes on a relationship with the ideal of Christian friendship.⁷⁴ *Amicitia* as a term does not go away, still useful in its broader meaning, but *caritas* in some ways supplants *amicitia* as the way that this nebulous concept of “friendship” is expressed between Christians, though both words are still used, and teasing apart the different contexts can be difficult.⁷⁵ It is difficult to pin down precisely what “friendship” means, as it is a concept that is bound tightly to cultural values and what a person defines as a “friendship” is also subject to individual variation. It is broadly understood that Classical *amicitia* required intimacy, as well as reciprocation and positive values which make the friendship “worthwhile”.⁷⁶ Christian love/friendship (*caritas*), on the other hand, was understood as being more “egalitarian”⁷⁷ as well as not always requiring reciprocation.⁷⁸ This is also evident from the origin and alternate meaning of the word “charity.” *Amicitia* in the classical imagination was also tied to hierarchical relationships, while *caritas* was explicitly intended to extend to all people, even those one did not like.⁷⁹ While this may seem to present a fundamental conflict— with one type of love having an expectation of reciprocity and the other eschewing that kind of expectation, the two ideas continued to coexist throughout Late Antiquity and into the Middle Ages. In these letters, the two terms both appear, and their use is tied to how friendship is conceptualized and constructed in the letters.

⁷⁴ White, Carolinne, ed. “Some Problems of Christian Friendship.” In *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 55.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 56.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 55.

⁷⁷ This does not mean that hierarchy actually went away. While the idea of Christian brother- and sister-hood called for a more “egalitarian” understanding, this does not mean, for example, that men and women were actually conceptualized as being equal. Rather, “egalitarian” refers more to the conception of brother-/sister-hood as opposed to other kinds of relationships, such as master and student, though these relationships did not *actually* go away.

⁷⁸ White, “Some Problems of Christian Friendship,” 1992, 55.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 57.

It might be expected that *caritas*, the more typically Christian term, would appear much more often in these letters. This is the case. In terms of pure numbers, the word *caritas*, *caritatis* *f.* appears 11 times across the letters, while *amicitia*, *-ae f.* appears only 4 times. Additionally, use of these two “words of friendship” are not equal across all the letters. Eangyth, for example, despite her intensive focus on friendship as a concept, actually uses *caritas* only once⁸⁰, and *amicitia* not at all (though she does quote Cicero’s *De Amicitia*). She instead is using words like *amicus* and *frater* to talk directly to Boniface. Bugga, on the other hand, uses the word *caritas* five times over the course of her much shorter letter (and *amicitia* no times), including her opening line (quoted in section III).

Pure numbers are only so helpful in understanding the use of these words and related concepts, given that both words have multiple meanings and may be used differently depending on the writer. Cena, whose letter is the shortest, uses both words a single time, and so provides an example of how the words might differ in their usage. She says, in the third line of her letter “*Et haec parva munuscula magis indicia caritatis sunt, quam ut tuae sanctitati digna sint.*” [And these meager little gifts are proof more of great **love**, than what is appropriate for your holiness].⁸¹ This may be a reference to physical gifts, or it could be more closely referencing the prayers she offers in the following sentence and the letter she is sending. She then says “*Et te rogo per creditam amicitiam, ut meae parvitati fidelis sis, sicut in te credo...*” [And I ask you through trusted **friendship**, that you may be loyal to my unimportance. Such as I believe in you...].⁸²

⁸⁰ “*quia non multam fiduciam habemus apud eos, qui in facie gloriantur et non in corde, sed de tua fide et caritate in Deum et dilectione in proximum.*”

⁸¹ Cena, *Letter to Boniface* c. 723-55.

⁸² *Ibid.*

In the first line she is reinforcing her relationship with Boniface, and in the next she is invoking that relationship. *Caritatis* could easily be translated as “friendship” here as well, given that the reference to gift-giving is calling on the social bonds created by letter exchange. The difference seems to be that, in the first line, Cena is extending her own love— selfless and humble (she says her gifts show her love, though they may not be enough for such holiness as Boniface). In the second, she is asking Boniface to remain loyal to her. While *caritas* could certainly make sense, Cena is calling upon reciprocity and trust to ask Boniface to remain loyal to her. By using the word *amicitia* she brings into the conversation reciprocal, more earthly bonds.⁸³ Shifting between both ideas, Cena constructs a complex interplay between her own charitable love to Boniface and her desire for reciprocal friendship.

Leoba does not use any form of the word *caritas* in her letter, but she does say “*Rogo tuam clementiam, ut memorare digneris prioris **amicitiae**, quam iam dudum cum patre meo copulasti...*” [I ask for your compassion, that you might think it worthy to be mindful of your prior **friendship**, which already before you shared with my father...].⁸⁴ In this case, it’s hard to tell how she is individually parsing the difference between the two words, but her use certainly falls into the pattern of *amicitia* as a broader term, and one that invokes some kind of reciprocal relationship. She wants him to recall a friendship that he had with her father in order to invoke that same kind of relationship to her. And she, similar to Cena, is using this word to preface a call for reciprocation from Boniface.

Bugga’s letter, which contains the largest volume of evidence for the use of *caritas*, is also helpful for figuring out how the word comes to be used. In her introduction in particular, she uses it pretty closely to mean “Christian love/friendship” as she offers her regard to Boniface.

⁸³ White 1992 also discusses how, for Christian writers, *amicitia* could also be spiritual in nature and not fundamentally contradictory with more selfless expressions of love.

⁸⁴ Leoba, *A Letter to Boniface* c. 732.

From all of these examples, it seems as if the idea that *caritas* is more representative of the kind of charitable love that characterizes ideal Christian friendship. The difference is relatively clear in Cena's two statements. In the first she is offering gifts to show her great care, asking nothing in return, while in the second she is asking for a reciprocal relationship. In Eangyth's one use of *caritas*, she is also gesturing to that kind of unselfish love, while her discussions of friendship when she quotes *De Amicitia* how much closer to the reciprocal, more earthly connotations of *amicitia*. In that situation, she is asking for a trusted friend with whom to share "*omnem secretum*" [every secret] that she holds close to her. Leoba, as well, is invoking a reciprocal relationship (in her case, a past relationship between two men that she positions herself as heir to).

Amicitia and *caritas* don't tell the whole story of friendship in these letters. Terms of kinship are also incredibly common, even when referring to non-family members. Hollis in *Anglo-Saxon Women and The Church* discusses the primacy of kinship relationships, both literal and metaphorical, in the building of community bonds in religious communities and, in particular, in the Boniface Correspondence. Actual familial relationships will be discussed in Section VI, but here the focus is on kinship terms as they refer to people who are not actually blood related (in the way that the term indicates).

Perhaps the most common, in these letters, is *frater* (brother) referring to Boniface. Eangyth says "*Amantissime frater, spiritalis magis quam carnalis, et spiritalium gratiarum munificentia magnificatus...*" [Most loved brother, more in spirit than in flesh, and known for great spiritual grace].⁸⁵ Immediately, in addition to being the great bishop Boniface, Eangyth also makes him her spiritual brother, more strikingly egalitarian relationship in some respects (though, of course, the gendered dynamics of sibling relationships in a world where men inherit

⁸⁵ Eangyth, *A Letter to Boniface* c. 719-22

property and hold immense social power is still present in such a word). In her letter, Eangyth calls Boniface “*frater*” twice more in her letter. Once around the middle and again in her goodbye. She again calls him a brother in spirit, bringing the theme full circle in the letter and re-emphasizing the kind of relationship she is creating and maintaining with Boniface.

Leoba also invokes familial ties extremely explicitly:

“Ergo unica filia sum ambobus parentibus meis; et utinam, licet sim indigna, ut merear te in fratris locum accipere, quia in nullo hominum generis mei tanta fiducia spei posita est mihi, quanta in te.”

[Thus, I am the only daughter of both my parents; and if only, although I may be unworthy, that I might merit to receive you in place of a brother, because in none of the human race is such trust of hope placed by me, than in you.]⁸⁶

Leoba is quite explicit about wanting to claim Boniface as a brother. Later in her letter, she also calls him “*frater amande*” [loved brother] in the context of asking him to pray for her. This connects her more literal desire for him as a brother to the spiritual sense of family that intertwines with the language of friendship in the same letters.

These two examples, along with smaller references— like Ecburg’s mention of a spiritual sisterly entwining— build out further the architecture of friendship presented in these letters. Friendship and kinship entwine at the site of spiritual connection. Family and friendship can easily become conflated, and they do here, explicitly and intentionally. Actual ties of kinship blend into spiritual ties and bonds of spiritual kinship are invoked alongside the words of friendship. Boniface, in these letters, is being strongly characterized both as an important and trusted mentor and also as a confidant, friend, and brother. The hierarchical exists alongside the egalitarian and weaves together a complex role for both the women themselves and for Boniface.

⁸⁶ Leoba, *A Letter to Boniface* c. 732.

Section VI: Social Networks and Epistolary Connections

One area of these letters that is particularly tantalizing is the brief outlines of social networks. Brief mentions of family, friends, and acquaintances. Letters were extremely important vessels for connection, and they were on some level, inherently communal affairs. Notably, letters could not be entirely private. Even if not dictated to scribe (as many letters in antiquity where), and even if there was an expectation of not reading the letter, someone (or many someones) had to carry it from sender to recipient.. And paper, parchment, ink, and the time to write were also commodities that have to be considered. It makes good sense to include other people in your letter because it is simply inconvenient to write three letters when one suffices. Beyond the practical, letters as a locus for social network creation make introductions in them a way to expand one's network and reinforce bonds of goodwill and mutual assistance.

In Bugga, Eangyth, and Ecburg's letters, the senders mention their messengers or other people who their letter is meant to serve, outlining some of the ways that letter-writing became a communal endeavor. Additionally, in Ecburg's, it seems that a messenger has appended his own text to the end of the letter after Ecburg's farewell.

In Bugga's letter, the reference to a messenger is short "*Et per eundem portitorem tibi transmitto nunc quinquaginta solidos et pallium altaris...*" [and through the same carrier I send to you now fifty solidi and an altar-cloth...].⁸⁷ She just mentions that she has sent a few gifts with the same messenger, presumably the same messenger that is delivering the letter. It is not clear if this messenger is someone she knows or someone who is just traveling the right direction. This is the shortest and vaguest mention of another person involved in the letter's delivery and purpose.

⁸⁷ Bugga, *A Letter to Boniface c. 720*.

Ecburg's letter has a more "direct" reference to a messenger. Indeed, it seems that someone—a man by the name of Ealdbeorcth wrote a line appended to the end of the letter after Ecburg's farewell. It is just two sentences, reading:

“Ego autem similiter Ealdbeorcth pauperculus Christi in Domino cum omni affectu saluto te. Deprecor te, ut illius amicitiae, quam olim spopondisti, in tuis deificatis orationibus recorderis; et licet corpore separemur, tamen recordatione iungamur.”

[I also similarly, Ealdbeorcth, poor servant of Christ, greet you in the Lord with all affection. I beg you, as of that friendship, which you once promised, to remember me in your sanctifying prayers; and though we may be separated in body, meanwhile we may be joined in memory.]⁸⁸

It seems as Ealdboercth himself added this short addendum, being that it is written in the first person from his perspective. Therefore, it appears that Ealdbeorcth is someone else who sought to add himself to the letter in the hopes of finding his way into Boniface's prayers. He seems to have known Boniface as well, referencing their *amicitia* and echoing the same theme of physical absence and mental/spiritual closeness that Ecburg focuses on in her letter. Yorke does identify Ealdbeorcth as a deacon who, thirty years later, added a postscript to a letter from Lull.⁸⁹ It also seems likely that he read her letter, given how closely he chooses to echo her themes.

Ealdbeorcth's presence on the periphery of the letter helps to further outline the role of other people—messengers, fellow writers—in the process of letter creation. A letter is not, in this case, a document written by a single person but a communal one added to later and expanded on.

Eangyth's letter also includes other people on behalf of whom the letter is written. Again, right at the end of her letter (just before the farewell), Eangyth mentions Denewald (who had been referenced earlier very briefly). She says:

“Et illum fratrem — supra memoratum sine nomine — necessarium amicum nostrum Denewaldum, si Deus disponat vel decreverit, ut dirigat viam eius in illas partes terrae et peregrinationem illam, in qua habitas, tu illum cum caritate et dilectione suscipias et, si

⁸⁸ Ecburg, *A Letter to Boniface c. 716-18*

⁸⁹ Yorke "The Bonifacian Mission and Female Religious in Wessex" 1998, 154.

voluntas eius vel desiderium flagitat, cum tua benedictione et gratia et eulogia dirigere digneris ad venerabilem fratrem nomine Bertheri, presbiteratus gratia decoratum et confessionis titulo notatum, qui diu incoluit illam peregrinationem.”

[And that brother— mentioned above without name— good friend our ours, Denewald, if God prescribes or declares it, that he directs his road into those parts of the world and that pilgrimage, in which you live, you may support him with Christian friendship and affection and, if his wish or desire demands, you may deem to direct him with your benediction/blessing and thanks and good news to the venerable brother named Berthere...]⁹⁰

This is the longest of the passages. Eangyth uses the end of her letter to introduce Denewald, a friend (“*amicum*”) of hers who is also a brother (“*fratrem*”) in her double monastery. It seems that he may be traveling to the area that Boniface is doing his missionary work in, and therefore Eangyth ought to introduce him to Boniface via letter so that he can find safe passage if he finds his way there. This kind of introduction further demonstrates the kind of social networks that letters could establish. Wide, loose networks could be established through the aid of letter-sending.⁹¹ These networks were a major part of the purpose of letter writing, as Eangyth is demonstrating. Of course, the largest part of her letter is about her personal desires and her relationship with Boniface, but she does not hesitate to also use her letter as a way of widening this social circle. Denewald is, by way of her letter, introduced to Boniface and also directed toward this other monk/priest, Berthere.

While these letters are primarily concerned with the relationship between these women and Boniface, it is impossible to conceive of letters outside their purpose as social documents that seek to establish, maintain, and increase social interconnectedness. While these letters seem to have been primarily composed and written by individuals, Ecburg’s letter makes it clear that

⁹⁰ Eangyth, *A Letter to Boniface c. 719-22*.

⁹¹ Neil, Bronwen, and Pauline Allen, eds. “Networks and Communities of Readers.” In *Greek and Latin Letters in Late Antiquity: The Christianisation of a Literary Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 117.

others could append their own writing into them. Bugga's letter, while only briefly, references the role of the messenger explicitly, drawing attention to the labor of delivering letters, and Eangyth's letter serves as introduction for another person, Denewald. All these traces of other people in the text demonstrate the social networks that letters helped to form and also helps to place these women and their writing firmly in the context of their social networks.

Another category of people mentioned often are the male relatives of these writers. Similar, but perhaps in the opposite way, these men often serve as social cachet to assist in the development of the image these women desire to portray. But, equally, they are real people whose lives intertwined with the letter-writers.

Familial relationships, while not the focus of any of the letters, come up often. As discussed, kinship and use of terms of kinship for non-blood related people was important. But equally the invocation of actual familial relationships is important for these women. For some of them, their female family members come up, but their male relatives also receive particular prominence in a few cases. Again, these women were not helpless, nor did they lack basic needs, but they were women, and they tell us that male relatives were still quite important.

Eangyth especially focuses on a *lack* of male relatives suitable for her requirements. From what she says it would seem that the only male relative she had was a nephew who may not be mentally sound:

“Non habemus filium neque fratrem, patrem aut patruum, nisi tantum unicam filiam penitus destitutam omnibus caris in hoc saeculo, praeter unam tantum sororem eius et matrem valde vetulam et filium fratris earum, et illum valde infelicem propter ipsius mentis”

[We do not have a son nor brother, father nor uncle, except my one daughter, entirely destitute from all loved ones in this world, except one such sister of hers and a very

elderly mother and the son of their brother, and he is very unhappy on account of his mind.]⁹²

While she comes from a wealthy family, this lack of male relatives clearly still deprives her in some way. In listing numerous relatives one after the other, she emphasizes how alone she and Bugga are, how deprived of all earthly help. It certainly paints a painful picture, but one that is also tied deeply to Eangyth's portrayal of herself as in need of Boniface's help.

And Eangyth is certainly not the only one, actual family members appear several times throughout the letters. Ecburg mentions her brother Oshere briefly before moving right along to her sister, Wethburg. In that way, she seems to be fairly independent of her male family (Eangyth, despite her lamentations, also seems to be in a secure place— she runs a double monastery). Leoba also brings up some of her relatives— her parents— and uses them as an avenue for connection with Boniface. Leoba invokes her father's *amicitia* with Boniface and her mother's actual kinship with Boniface to create a relationship with him. It seems that, for Leoba, a friend of one's parent(s) becomes part of one's own friend by extension.

Networks of family, particularly male family, were evidently important practical considerations for these women, as well as being part of the construction of their desires within the letters. Eangyth in particular points to the importance of male relatives above and beyond female ones, who, in her account, are either unhelpful or perhaps even burdensome. However, the other letters do not bear this out to the same extent— Ecburg is much more concerned with her sister than with her brother, and Leoba is equally interested invoking her mother's familial connection to Boniface as she is pulling in her father's friendship with Boniface

The mentions of other women in these letters are perhaps the most tantalizing, since often women are marginalized on the stage of history and it can be difficult to recover their

⁹² Eangyth, *A Letter to Boniface* c. 719-22

traces from the margins. These letters contain the scarce outlines of networks of women operating in a patriarchal society. Eangyth mentions her daughter Bugga, her sister, her deceased mother, and Wala (her “abbess and spiritual mother”). Ecburg speaks at some length about Wethburg, her sister. Leoba mentions Aebba, her mother, and Eadburg (an abbess and Leoba’s teacher). Cena and Bugga make no explicit mention of any other women.

Given how short these mentions are (with the notable exception of Ecburg, who writes at greater length), it is hard to draw solid conclusions or make expansive claims about any of these relationships. Despite this, there are some things which the short passages can show, as can the ways in which these relationships are being leveraged in the larger context of the letter. What descriptions these letters do contain gesture to complex realities.

Broadly, Eangyth, Ecburg, and Leoba discuss two kinds of relationships with other women— their abbesses (former or current) and their families. The two abbesses, Wala and Eadburg, are both mentor figures for the respective letter-writers. The two women are mentioned briefly:

“Istam artem ab Eadburge magisterio didici, quae indesinenter legem divinam rimare non cessat.”

[I learned that art⁹³ from Eadburg, teaching, who doesn’t cease to delve into divine law.]⁹⁴

“Et huius meae voluntatis atque propositi milli conscia fuit Wale, abbatissa quondam mea et mater spiritalis.” [

[And of this, my wish and proposal,⁹⁵ Wala was aware— once my abbess and spiritual mother.]⁹⁶

⁹³ Latin poetry

⁹⁴ Leoba, *A Letter to Boniface* c. 732.

⁹⁵ To go on a pilgrimage to Rome.

⁹⁶ Eangyth, *A Letter to Boniface* c. 719-22.

In both instances, it is clear that these two women are/were mentors for Leoba and Eangyth. In the case of Leoba, Eadburg taught her to write Latin poetry (which she attempts in the following lines). This points to a teacher/student relationship within the monastic context wherein older, more highly ranked nuns and abbesses taught newer members of the abbey. And, they did not only teach biblical concepts and religious rituals, but also poetry, a skill certainly not essential to the function of nuns. Nonetheless, Eadburg chose to teach “that art” to Leoba for reasons that are not clear (Did Leoba want to learn to compose poetry? Did Eadburg consider it a mark of class or learning? Was it a common practice?). It also demonstrates the highly literate and educated nature of abbeys, which is an acknowledged fact (discussed more in Section II) Leoba is gesturing at the complex system of abbeys and powerful women religious that was present in England other areas of Europe in her time and how knowledge was passed down within that system when women often otherwise would not have easy access to higher levels of education.

Wala, on the other hand, is brought up as a confidant and advisor. Eangyth calls her “*mater spiritalis*” and specifies that she was one of the only people to know of Eangyth’s desire to go to Rome. Eangyth is ultimately seeking Boniface’s permission for her pilgrimage, but it is clear that she shared her desires first with her former abbess. While Wala doesn’t have the ecclesiastical authority to approve, Eangyth sees her as a valuable advisor and confidant. Perhaps a conventional role, but nonetheless indicative of the tight-knit nature of religious orders (particularly for a widowed mother like Eangyth). Wala was a trusted authority who was part of the spiritual family into which Eangyth is also putting Boniface. It is also notable that Wala was respected enough to be the first advisor on a decision which Eangyth admits is controversial.

The other group the three women refer to are family members. Eangyth refers to her daughter a few times:

“...et unica filia eius Heaburg cognomento Buggae in sancta trinitate aeternam salutem.” (

[[Eangyth]...and one daughter Heaburg, known as Bugga, send eternal greeting in the holy trinity.]

“Et unica filia adhuc in annis iuvenilibus fuit, et huius rei desiderium querere nescivit.”

[And my only daughter until now was too young in years, and did not know to seek the wish of this.]⁹⁷

Eangyth’s daughter, when she is writing the letter, is an adult (given how close her own letter is dated), but she also refers back to when her daughter was young and therefore unable to travel, keeping Eangyth stationary regardless of her own desire. Knowing that Eangyth is an abbess and has a child makes it clear that she was probably a widow, meaning that monastic life might have offered an alternative to blood family. And Eangyth is eager, as seen above, to portray how isolated she and Bugga are. Why she does this is clear in the wider context of the letter. This portion of her letter is dedicated to demonstrating to Boniface that she lacks other confidants (currently, Wala is no longer her abbess) and relatives who might care for her. In that context, her female relatives would lack the authority that healthy male relatives would wield. Therefore, emphasizing the lack of reliable relatives beyond her daughter looks to Boniface as the needed authority.

Leoba speaks about her mother, who is infirm due to illness:

“Nec non et matris meae memoriam commendo tibi, quae cognominatur Aebbae; quae tibi, ut melius nosti, consanguinitatis nexibus copulatur et adhuc laboriose vivit et diu valide ab infirmitate obpressa est.”

⁹⁷ Eangyth, *A Letter to Boniface* c. 719-22. She also refers to Bugga again when listing off family members, quoted above in this section.

[And I entrust the memory of my mother to you, who was known as Aebba, whom to you, as you know well, is joined with bonds of blood and who as yet lives laboriously and every day is greatly pressed down by sickness.]⁹⁸

The purpose here seems to be somewhat similar— to remind Boniface that she lacks a strong support system and therefore needs his assistance and friendship. Both women also uncover the importance of family more generally, Leoba in particular. She invokes a blood relationship between Boniface and her mother (and therefore herself) as a way of tying herself to Boniface. The fact that she is related likely implies some amount of responsibility on Boniface's part.

Leoba also mentions how her mother suffers illness. This passage reveals a stark reality— ill or elderly relatives could not provide practical help (whatever emotional bond they shared), and might be a financial responsibility on these women in absence of fit male relatives to take it on. They were possibly caring for multiple dependents while also living consecrated lives.

Ecburg is the writer who pauses longest over a female relative— her sister Wethburg. A fairly long portion of her letter is dedicated to explaining the separation she has experienced when her sister went into seclusion in Rome, and her grief at the separation. Ecburg's passage is perhaps the most affecting, even paraphrasing Aeneid II to demonstrate the extremity of her grief. Ecburg's passage goes the furthest to demonstrate a close familial relationship between two women that clearly provided her great joy. So much so that, while she also speaks of being aggrieved of her brother's death, she talks at much greater length about her sister. This passage, discussed more fully in Section IV, demonstrates the immense importance of this sisterly relationship for Ecburg.

⁹⁸ Leoba, *A Letter to Boniface* c. 732.

These letters have scant references to the relationships that existed between women, but the references that are there outline the complex networks that did exist and gesture toward the interdependence both of women within abbeys and sisters, mothers, and daughters. The mentions of these women in the letters both reflect the complex realities of the writers and serve purposes within the letters to persuade and develop themes of letter-writing.

It is simple to initially assume that feminine relationships would bear emotional importance, while male ones should be more clearly practical (and could also be emotional), since men typically wielded legal and social power more readily. Of course, the context of these women then comes into sharp account. Within the aristocratic backgrounds many of them come from, they already bear a different kind of social power (that of wealth), and, in the context of an abbey, these women wield significant power within a space already deeply segregated by gender. So, it makes much more sense, in that context, that female relationships would take on additional importance both emotionally and practically. In addition, all of these women are cultivating a friendship with a male authority figure— Boniface himself— so the importance of extending social circles to include powerful male figures is perhaps self-evident from the existence of the letter.

Conclusion

Letters exist on boundaries— the personal and the private, the literary and the practical—, and they give us opportunity, sometimes, to learn about the lives of people whose stories are not otherwise preserved. Letters also give us the opportunity to learn how people wrote about themselves. However, it is also important to analyze letters as a genre with conventions and expectations that govern how people write.

These five letters by Cena, Eangyth, Bugga, Ecburg, and Leoba, are part of that long tradition of letter-writing. They use epistolary codes, themes, and language to construct complex worlds in text that connect them to much wider networks. They all have different goals in their writing, of course. However, common threads can be uncovered in how they play within the roles prescribed to them as women religious. They are all deeply concerned with their spiritual health and connection to others within that Christian context. At the same time, they are highly literate and well-read, wielding significant power within their personal spheres.

It is not possible to easily flatten these five letters into a single conclusion. However, it can be argued that letter-writing provided a locus for these women to exercise power within bounds of acceptable behavior (and, certainly, none of these women are rebelling strongly against their roles, more typically playing into them). They are able to, through a deep grasp of the letter-writing culture they live in, construct complex selves that are both playing expected roles and using those roles to still exercise their power. In addition, the power to write another person the way that a letter allows cannot be understated. Letter-writing was and is a fundamentally collaborative process, in which writers construct each other over and over, writing new roles and trying to get the other to say the lines they need them too as well as foster real connection across distance. These women write Boniface as their friend and mentor, revealing the ways that friendship, kinship, and spiritual life intertwine within a letter and create complex relationships through writing.

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