CONCLUSION

AS I WAS interviewing the nuns of La Maigrauge in April 2018, sister C told me that she would enjoy incorporating ceremonies like the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* in her house's own Easter liturgy. Sisters B, A, and D further reflected on their sepulchre and on the long-lost knowledge as to its use: perhaps the abbey of La Maigrauge, too, had performed *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* ceremonies in the Middle Ages? With their comments, the sisters highlighted the adaptability of the Barking dramatic liturgical ceremonies. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction to this book, *Elevationes* and *Visitationes* were performed in numerous men's and women's religious houses throughout Europe. They would have been familiar to a multitude of nuns, to their clergy, and parishioners.

None of the many recorded medieval conventual versions of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* are precisely the same as the Barking one. The *Ludus paschalis* from the Benedictine Abbey of Origny, for instance, contains rubrics and some chants in the vernacular.[1] The Marys buy ointment from the merchant and Mary Magdalen and the Angel communicate in French. The Troyes and Origny *Visitationes*' rubrics are also in the vernacular instead of Latin. The Wilton Abbey *Visitatio* includes a mention of Christ who *percutiat capud eius spiculo* (should strike her [Mary Magdalen] head with a weapon), and it seems to imply that the priest representing the angel at the tomb also represented Christ: "Angelus. Si tu scire vis quisnam ego sum ihesus vocitor" (Angel: If you want to know who I am: I am called Jesus).[2] Furthermore, these houses used their abbey church in their own way during the two ceremonies. In Poitiers, for example, the angel and abbess went *in medio choro* (to the middle of the choir) at the beginning of the *Visitatio* and the sepulchre had a *fenestram* (window) that seems to have given on to the outside of the church. These nunneries all had a specific relationship with their clergy and enjoyed a unique status.[3] They may also have had ties

1 This play was staged by the Medieval Convent Drama Project in April 2019 (directed by Elisabeth Dutton). It will be part of the project's forthcoming edition, Robinson, Dutton, Blanc, and Salisbury, eds., *Theatre in the Convent*.

2 Yardley, *Performing Piety*, 253.

3 On Origny's history and the house's relationship with the canons of Saint-Vaast, see Gardill, *Sancta Benedicta*. On Poitiers, see Edwards, *Superior Women*. On Wilton, see *Writing the Wilton Women*, ed. Hollis with Barnes et al.

to each other, shared letters, books, and perhaps even their *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* ceremonies.[4]

Each would thus deserve an in-depth analysis, as they all have something unique to add to the research on women and performance and on conventual performance. As described in this book's introduction, performances by women religious were extremely varied in the Middle Ages. In addition to dramatic liturgical ceremonies, they included performative activities generally conducted on feast days (performances around the feast of St Nicholas especially) and events which more unambiguously resemble "plays" (the Huy plays, Hildegard von Bingen's *Ordo virtutum*, or Hrotsvit's plays). Within this diversity, numerous questions about the culture and literacy of medieval women religious, their ties to the outside world, their creativity, their opinion of drama and performance, the connections between performance and religion, the composition of drama in such a context, and the circumstances of its performance remain to be explored. These texts would further benefit from being analysed not only as sources on the life of women religious but as literary artifacts. The recent work of Sarah Brazil on the Barking and Wilton *Visitatio* as embodied practices will hopefully inspire scholars to follow in that direction.[5]

While much research is still to be conducted on known conventual performative activities, there is also likely a wealth of these activities that have not yet been brought to light. Projects such as REED have enabled the compilation of evidence for these events in England and Great Britain. Yet a considerable amount of work must be done before this kind of compilation can be completed on a European level. German-speaking regions in particular, where most of the extant conventual *Visitatio sepulchri* ceremonies come from, may reveal new data in the study of convent drama. Moreover, although classifying convent drama as a genre proves difficult, there seems to be a tendency in conventual performance-related activities towards a greater emphasis on female figures and towards reflections on the virtues or experiences of virgins, women religious, and women in general. This raises the question as to whether some play-texts that present character-

4 Barking Abbey, for instance, possessed a life of St Edith of Wilton and her feast was celebrated there. The manuscript containing the Barking lives of St Catherine and St Edward belonged to the nunnery of Campsey Ash, which suggests that these lives travelled between religious houses. See also Matthews, "Textual Spaces / Playing Spaces," 82–85; Rankin, "A New English Source," 1–2; de Boor, *Die Textgeschichte der lateinischen Osterfeiern*, 255–57, 288; Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession*, 139–40.

5 Brazil, "Performing Female Sanctity."

istics associated with cloistered women—for instance the fourteenth-century Thuringian *Ludus de decem virginibus* (Play of the Ten Virgins), which cannot yet be tied to a religious house—are convent drama. An important amount of evidence thus remains to be analysed for the understanding of convent drama in Europe to become more comprehensive.

It is my hope that this book participates in enriching the knowledge of convent drama through its focus on the performative culture of Barking Abbey. I was especially interested in the house's *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* ceremonies. I wished to know, from the point of view of a drama and literature scholar, what could be learned about their intentional and potential effects on their spectators and participants. Chapter 1 based itself on the house's literary and liturgical culture, as well as on its ties with its parishioners, to chart some of the potential reactions of the abbey's nuns, clergy, and laity to the ceremonies. Chapter 2 considered modern spectators and participants and used performance research as its approach.

What has emerged from this research is that, while the note preceding the two Barking ceremonies shows that they were intended primarily to affect lay spectators, they would also have significantly affected their religious participants. Drama and dramatic liturgical ceremonies can be targeted towards a specific audience—as was the case at Barking—yet when they are performed, those who have spent time preparing them, who have worked together to create the performance, who are embodying "characters" in front of spectators, are also affected. The effective and affective potential of the Barking Abbey ceremonies is therefore considerably greater than the Ordinal note expresses. It is also more complex. According to the note, the ceremonies were meant to affect devotion. There is a myriad of ways in which they could have done so. But they could also have been a show of power for the nunnery, could have participated in community building and identity defining, and could have been educational. The ceremonies are a mirror of the expectations, knowledge, opinion, creativity, faith, and self-image of the house of Barking in the early fifteenth century. They were influenced by numerous factors and were performed and witnessed by individuals who were themselves the recipients of varied influences. The reactions of spectators and participants to them were thus multiple, at once collective and deeply personal.

Such reactions cannot be clearly determined for each spectator and participant. However, what transpires from my research is that the effects—intended and potential—of the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* were often enhanced by the ceremonies' dramatic features. For example, the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*'s focus on compassionate devotion—noticeable especially in

the laments of the Marys—was reinforced by their synesthetic representation of the events of the life of Christ in front of nuns, clergy, and laity. Such a representation helped spectators and participants imagine themselves as witnesses to these scriptural events—as recommended by meditations on the life of Christ. A second example is the association in the *Visitatio* between the Marys and the nuns of the abbey. Such an association could have been made based on the women's similar devotion and on the common perception of Mary Magdalen as a model for the Brides of Christ. However, it became much less ambiguous with these nuns embodying the three Marys. A strong sense of association would have influenced the nuns' view of their identity and community, their relationships with the clergy and the laity, and their perception of their own power and status. The ceremonies' dramatic features further helped clarify the story depicted in the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. This made them a more efficient teaching tool since it allowed them to present this story in an understandable and memorable way. Understanding the story told and made present in these two liturgical ceremonies also cued spectators and participants to understand the scriptural story made present in other, less representational, liturgical ceremonies that shared the same space, chants, gestures, movements, and objects. The *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*'s dramatic features even made the nature of liturgy—this making present of scriptural events—more comprehensible by presenting a recognizable scriptural story with present-day means. They thus benefitted the devotional participation of spectators and performers in the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* and in liturgy in general.

I therefore return to the crucial question of drama and liturgy. While the two Barking ceremonies are liturgical, their dramatic features do not seem to contradict their liturgical nature. On the contrary, used within this specific liturgical context, these features enable an experience of liturgy resembling more closely what liturgy actually is: a moment when the past is brought into the present and the present into the past. The dichotomy sometimes established between drama and worship should therefore be reconsidered: worship can motivate the creation and performance of drama, drama can lead to worship, but drama can also *be* worship. This was experienced by David in the 2018 production of the Barking *Visitatio* and *Elevatio*. For him, performing was a moment of prayer. Yet he acknowledged that the dramatic features of the ceremonies were contributing to his prayer. He found that seeing people he knew portray the three Marys *m'a beaucoup touché* (was especially moving) and that their movement and singing made him think about and appreciate this story anew: "c'est une belle histoire. C'est une belle histoire" (It's a beautiful story. It's a beautiful story). Guillaume, who

did not share David's faith, approached his performance as he would any play. However, the ceremonies reconnected him with his Catholic heritage and "helped [him] get more in touch…with [his] spiritual side." Even for him, acting in the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* recalled worship and transported him "not only into that time but that mindset, that spiritual place." As for the nuns of La Maigrauge, they found the dramatic features of the ceremonies performed at Barking Abbey and in their house to be effective in inspiring the faith of spectators and participants. Sister B felt that the movements in the space and the costumes helped *vivre mieux les textes* (to live the texts more fully). Sister D also praised the Barking ceremonies' use of movement and dialogue and believed that these might make the texts more striking. Sister E found the unusual nature of the ceremonies favourable to initiating prayer and contemplation.[6]

How about the nuns of Barking Abbey? What did they think of their *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*? Did they find them as effective as the nuns of La Maigrauge did? Their inclusion in the Ordinal and Customary is evidence of the sisters' perception of their usefulness. The nuns wanted these ceremonies to be recorded and, as suggested in a note at the beginning of the Ordinal, they intended them to be performed again in the future. This note declares that the Ordinal was written for the use of future abbesses who should continue to follow its indications—*Elevatio* and *Visitatio* included:

> Memorandum quod Anno domini Millesimo quadringentesimo quarto domina Sibilla permissione diuina Abbatissa de Berkyng hunc librum ad usum Abbatissarum in dicta domo in futurum existencium concessit. et in librario eiusdem loci post mortem cuiuscumque in perpetuum commemoraturum ordinauit. donec eleccio inter moniales fiat. tunc predictus liber eidem electe in Abbatissam per superiores domus post stallactionem deliberator.
>
> It will be recorded that in the year of the Lord 1404, Dame Sibilla, by divine permission abbess of Barking, gave and ordered this book for the use of the future abbesses living in the said house and as a perpetual reminder for them, [stipulating] that after the death of any abbess the book [should be kept] in the library of the same place until an election takes place among the nuns. At that point the aforesaid book is given over by senior nuns of the house to the nun who has been elected abbess, after her installation.[7]

6 A, B, D, E.

7 *Ordinale and Customary*, ed. Tolhurst, 1:13; translation by Yardley, "Liturgy as the Site of Creative Engagement," 271.

While there exists no further evidence of the performance of the ceremonies at Barking, the Ordinal remained in use until at least 1507 and possibly until the Dissolution of the Monasteries (in 1539 for Barking Abbey). The *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* may therefore have been performed until then by the nuns and clergy of the abbey in front of generations of spectators, each time offering a different performance and producing different effects.[8] Although the Dissolution marked the unquestionable end of the performances of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* at Barking Abbey, it did not entirely sever the ties between performance and the nunnery.

About four hundred years after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, in 1931, the Barking Town Urban District Council decided to organize festivities to celebrate the acquisition of its "charter (an official document of incorporation) to become an Essex Borough."[9] These festivities started on October 1 and ended on October 11. They comprised an industrial exhibition, an amusement park, a civic procession, and a pageant performed twelve times over the course of the celebrations. This pageant was a large and impressive spectacle. Pageant-master Frank Lascelles was brought in to direct its eleven scenes, most of which were written by the Headmaster of Barking Abbey School E. A. Loftus. About two thousand inhabitants of the borough performed either as actors or as singers. Other inhabitants made costumes or were active behind the scenes. Over the ten days of celebrations, about two hundred thousand people attended the festivities, including prestigious guests such as HRH Prince George, the Lord Mayor of London, and the Countess of Warwick.[10]

The eleven scenes of the Barking Pageant were performed on the site of the ancient abbey. They told the history of the borough of Barking from Roman times until the eighteenth century and finished with an epilogue during which men and women of the past and the present came together to praise the borough. In seven of these scenes, the abbey played a central role. These were titled, in order:

Scene 2 – the foundation of Barking Abbey, 666 AD

Scene 3 – the obsequies of Bishop Erkenwald, 693 AD

8 There is an entry made in the Ordinal and Customary in a later hand, referencing abbess Elizabeth Grene (abbess 1500–1528) and the date 1507. *Ordinale and Customary*, ed. Tolhurst, 2:363.

9 "The Barking Pageant, 1931."

10 "The Barking Pageant, 1931"; Bartie, Fleming, Freeman, Hulme, Hutton, and Readman, "The Barking Historical Pageant."

Scene 4 – the destruction of the Abbey by the Danes in 870 AD

Scene 5 – King Edgar founding the second abbey ca. 960 AD

Scene 6 – William the Conqueror at the Abbey, 1066 AD

Scene 7 – the Abbey at the height of its glory, ca. 1136 AD

Scene 8 – the dissolution of the Abbey, 1539 AD.[11]

Barking Abbey, whose sisters and clergy had been so intertwined with performance and who had used such performance to reach the laity, found itself represented by the laity in these modern performances. Men and women of the borough of Barking put on medieval habits and liturgical vestments, spoke lines they imagined the nuns and clergy of the nunnery would have spoken, and represented their lives and faith through movements and gestures.

While this event tied Barking Abbey once more with performance, it was in many ways unlike the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio sepulchri*. It contained music but it was mostly spoken in the vernacular and was performed by the laity. It therefore resembles more closely medieval plays in the vernacular or festive performative activities than it does the two liturgical ceremonies. Its aims were also different. In the strenuous economic context of the early thirties, the pageant and the festivities in general had an "economic boosterist aim."[12] They attempted to show Barking as an attractive space for newcomers. The souvenir programme, for instance, explained how ideal a place it was for the establishment of industries. The pageant itself depicted the modern Barking, which had been expanding rapidly in recent years, and tied it to an ancient prestigious history, elevating and legitimizing in this process the status of the new borough. This valorization of Barking through the performance of the pageant also had a second aim: that of fostering community and "carving a sense of municipal pride" at what Barking had been and continued to be. In the pageant's epilogue, all performers joined together and sang the "Song of Barking" before crying out: "Long live Barking!" Although it is complicated to assess whether the pageant achieved its first aim, it seems to have achieved—at least partly—its second aim. In addition to the production's spectacular quality, reporters repeatedly noted the enthusiasm of the Barking inhabitants for the performance of these scenes. The pageant was further believed to have affected its spectators and participants in other ways.

11 "The Barking Pageant, 1931."

12 Bartie, Fleming, Freeman, Hulme, Hutton, and Readman, "The Barking Historical Pageant."

The vicar of Barking, H. C. Robins, told the press that the performances had "spiritual significance." He felt that they could inspire the townspeople by "showing the role that religion had played in Barking's past." He tied religion to community, believing that it would help citizens follow virtuous values and work for the future of their community. The educational and communal value of the pageant was further noted by the bishop of Chelmsford.[13]

The Barking Pageant therefore differed from the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* in various ways, but its composers and performers undertook work similar to that done by the abbey of Barking. Like the nuns and clergy of the nunnery, they adapted stories of the past in a way that aligned with their interests and their values. And while the pageant's aims and effects were specific to its context, they resemble at times those of the medieval ceremonies. The Barking Pageant was intended to be community-building and identity-defining; it was seen as a teaching tool; it was an impressive, awe-inducing spectacle; and it could be spiritual. Both the medieval and modern inhabitants of Barking therefore perceived drama and performance as a useful and effective way of transmitting a message and of affecting spectators and participants. No reference to the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* is included in the Barking Pageant, no nod made to the culture of performance existing in the abbey, no lineage attempted to be traced between medieval and modern performance. Yet nearly five hundred years later, the abbey of Barking found itself once more at the centre of a vivid nexus of liturgy, devotion, power, pedagogy, community, and identity, all tied together and all expressed through the medium of performance.

13 Bartie, Fleming, Freeman, Hulme, Hutton, and Readman, "The Barking Historical Pageant."