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Medieval Literature

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Annotated Bibliography: Saint Margaret

Bernau, Anke; Evans, Ruth. *Medieval Virginities.* University of Wales Press: 2001. Print.

Bernau and Evans made an interesting connection between virgin martyr-saints and Christ:

“But the Eucharistic *corpus Christi* (body of Christ) is not the only medieval body to be tested this way. Numerous lives of female virgin martyrs (Katherine, Margaret, Barbara and so on) produced in England during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, celebrated the triumph of a pure and inviolate Christian woman over the dark forces of pagan unbelief. And the battleground is specifically that of the female body […] Saint Margaret lives through a variety of superhuman ordeals […] including being [hanged] up high, as the Jews did to Christ. The injuries done to her body – beating, and piercing – are reminiscent of the buffeting and scourging of Christ” (Evans, 168, 172).

With this view in mind, one can see why perhaps female virgin saints were more widely venerated, as they, like Christ, managed to remain virgins, a task simply impossible (and not really called for) among men. Additionally, Bernau and Evans point out, Margaret’s story especially, is comparative to Christ’s and his suffering. This is interesting especially since she was removed from sainthood as she was deemed unhistorical. Christ himself did some unrealistic (or difficult to believe) things, and it is curious that Margaret was removed due to her experiences, which simply involved demons.

Bledsoe, Jenny C. “The Cult of St. Margaret of Antioch at Tarrant Crawford: The Saint’s Didactic Body and its Resonance for Religious Women”. *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*; 39. 2. (2013). 173-198. Academia.edu. Web. 22 Oct. 2014.

The single greatest discovery of my research as of yet is owed to a then-graduate-student of the University of Tennessee, Jenny C. Bledsoe. Bledsoe “specializes in high to late medieval religious literature, with a particular interest in the didactic goals, pastoral concerns, and models of holiness inherent in hagiography and devotional literature” and is now a part of the Emory English Department (Emory.edu). Throughout my readings of Teochimus’ story of St. Margaret, Caxton’s English translation of de Jacobus de Voragine “The Golden Legend: St. Margaret” and even commentaries on St. Margaret’s life, I was frustrated with and suspicious of the unyielding theme of chastity and childbirth in such a colorful, gruesome, charged story. Bledsoe’s research led to a thrilling discovery of gross violation of the St. Margaret’s story, I learned, to more pointedly preach the message of chastity for an audience of anchoresses, or nunnery, essentially, of female religious recluses:

“The author of the ‘Katherine Group’ [described as a ‘guide book’ for anchorites/anchoresses, in which saints’ lives were included] altered *The Life of St. Margaret* in order to emphasize certain characteristics that make the saint’s experience very much relatable to that of the anchoress. These changes alone indicate that the vitae of the ‘Katherine Group’ were intended for an isolated religious audience such as the anchoresses at Tarrant […] the ‘emphasis on the temptation of the flesh was deliberate,’ as ‘suggested by the author’s alterations of the Latin version in which he expands and emphasizes physical suffering.’ [It] also includes “a dramatic episode not found in any other known version of her life.” In this added segment, after St. Margaret conquers a demonic dragon, another demon appears and “explains how it has often ensnarled good people trying to lead clean lives” (Bledsoe 177).

This is to say, the demon that appears to Margaret with whom she converses freely and demand of him his name and to know why he torments the children of God with temptation – *did not appear in the original story.* Any student of religion, history or literature should find that upsetting. Saint Margaret’s colorful and heroic tale is reduced to mere propaganda to remain virginal – not spiritual strength, not courage, not demonic warfare. Overall it is not shocking that a story including a dragon had any falsities involved – but the fact that the first known embellishment has to do with the issue of female virginity is outrageous. What about other concepts, such as the demons, and the story of Margaret meeting a demon that King Solomon himself had bound, written several hundred years apart, both mention? Why, in a spiritual world where demons exist, is female virginity so essential to a woman’s worth and salvation?

Caxton, William, trans. “The Golden Legend: St. Margaret.” Compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, 1275. The Temple Classics. Ed. F.S. Ellis. First issue of this Edition, 1900. Reprinted 1922, 1931. Web. 14 Oct. 2014. Document URL. Fordham University.

William Caxton translated “The Golden Legend: St. Margaret” in the 1400s, and, according to Wikipedia, died the year Columbus would discover the New World. Originally published in Italian more than seven hundred years ago, the stories of the saints that de Voragine collected were translated by William Caxton into English, including this translation of the original story of St. Margaret, including her purity, imprisonment, torture, discourse with demons, and eventual execution. There are revealing and key *additions* to the text, not seen in that authored by Teochimus. Also, interestingly, unlike Teochimus who claimed to have known Margaret and therefore absolutely believed her story, Caxton includes the original skepticism of de Voragine, who adds, after the miraculous immersion of Margaret from the dragon, “in another place it is said that he swallowed her into his belly, she making the sign of the cross […] so she issued out all whole and sound. This swallow and breaking of the belly of the dragon is said that it is apocryphal” (Caxton 2). Yes, even miracles can be *too* miraculous.

Though skeptical of the miraculous here, de Voragine adds no doubt to the identity of the demon Margaret all but wrestles, which is *not found* in the original document we saw in class supposedly authored by one named Teochimus; Although the original document and Caxton agree that the demon came from a banishment of that of King Solomon, accidentally set free by the Babylonians, in the Teochimus document the demon only provides his identity as “”whatever my name may be, I have been man’s greatest foe after Beelzebub[[1]](#footnote-1)” (Teochimus, 7). Caxton/de Voragine’s version chillingly renders the demon’s name as “Veltis, one of them whom Solomon closed in a vessel of brass”, on whom much information concerning the event of being bound by King Solomon is available (Caxton 2). The identity of the demon opens a *world* of information.

The translation also refers to the villain Olybrius as “provost”, or “Provost Olybrius” in quite a few places. The old translation of provost involves definitions that refer both to a clerical (Olybrius is even referred to as “the minister” in one instance) or a bailiff, which suggests incarceration related work; this could be a word play on part of the author, be it de Voragine or Caxton, however, is impossible to tell. More outstanding in this version also is the conversion of and *beheading* of five thousand men (not including women and children according to Teochimus (Teochimus 7)) – a detail easily over looked in Teochimus’ version simply because it is so dense and drawn out; does the immediate execution of five thousand converts still qualify as miraculous? And if so, isn’t this a larger sacrifice than Margaret’s?

Gravdal, Katherine. *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*. University of Pennsylvania Press: 2001. Print.

Gravdal presented a theory I had not yet come across in my research: the consumption of Margaret by the dragon was analogous to rape:

“This startling scene is explained to audiences in the following lines, when a second devil confessed that the ‘devouring’ was an attempted rape: ‘I have sent my brother Rufon, in the form of a dragon, to swallow you and destroy all memory of you on earth, and tarnish your virginity” (Gravdal 37).

Now that I consider it, this doesn’t really surprise me, but does cause me to ask even more questions about the spectrum of obsession with sex during this period. If virgins, women were highly valued and/or venerated. Virginity has a concept in history and today of being something that can be “taken.” Adding to the fuel that women are simply objects, they possess a thing desirable and simultaneously responsible for damning them to hell if they should *“give it away”* to anyone whom the church or her parents or God deem unfit.

Kelly, Kathleen Coyne,. *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Medieval Ages*. New York: Routledge. 2000.

Dr. Kelly, professor at Northeastern University, author of two books and dozens of articles and essays on medieval literature, states in this book that “the concept of virginity is developed within and across a number of different discourses in the Medieval Ages: medical and scientific treatises, patristic writings and the medieval commentaries on them, legal records […] judicial ordeals[…] and literary texts” but most importantly, as I suspected, “defining and claiming virginity in the early, formative centuries of the church helped to consolidate Church authority”

(Kelly 1-2, 5). I believe this is true due to the manipulation that was discovered of the text of Saint Margaret that added a stress to virginity that was not there in the original story – as time and the church progressed, the importance of the concept of virginity to the church increased, and thus already virginal martyrs’ legends were made *more* virginal, if possible. Dr. Kelly is most concerned with the transitional use of the importance of virginity through the church’s need to consolidate power and hold sway over its followers. Not only should a woman be a virgin if not married, but she should be pristinely virginal, in body and mind, and in so doing does she best serve Christ and love God.

Reames, Sherry L., “Margaret of Antioch” *Middle English Legends of Women Saints.* Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publication, 2003. 1-2. Web. 14 Oct. 2014.

Reames is an English professor of English at Wisconsin University. She is the editor of a great number of books concerning medieval texts, an example of which is accessible at the University of Rochester website ([http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/ creator/sherry-reames](http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/%20creator/sherry-reames)). Reames founded the Hagiography Society in 1990. The “Sherry L. Reames Graduate Student Travel Award for Hagiographical Studies”, funded by the Hagiography Society, provides a student with a staggering three hundred dollars “to be used toward travel to present at the [International Congress on Medieval Studies](http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/congress/), held annually at the University of Western Michigan in Kalamazoo, Michigan.”

Reames’ discussion of the legend of St. Margaret, provides readers with a background understanding of how the story both inspired and frustrated its readers: “Despite clerical discomfort with the dragon scene, it could not be dropped completely from vernacular lives of Margret because it served as the source for familiar iconography of this saint” (Reames 1). This would be due to the fact that a “wide range of believers might turn to this saint in times of trouble, [including] petitions for the preservation of chastity, safe childbirth and healthy offspring, protection from other kinds of danger, and forgiveness of sins” (Reames 1).

Despite the length, breadth and depth of the story, imagery (including dragons!), spirituality, mention of heaven, hell, demons, and brutalities, an allusion to the tension of a spiritual war that takes place between God and Satan over every soul, “In most versions of the legend, the devil’s main target is chastity” (Reames 2). How convenient for the devil to have to concern himself with murder, lies, greed or any of the deadly sins, in my opinion, more terrible sins than lack of a virginal state. The focus on sexuality – whether chastity or the results of reproduction – is troublesome to me. Surely if a man had emerged from the dragon (as men are born too!) his patronage would not be childbirth. If a man stepped out of the dragon, he may very likely be the patron saint of soldiers. It is honorable to the character of Margaret (a young, brave woman) that she is remembered for more than simply being a virgin, but for being strong and steadfast and is called upon by many.

Riches, Sam; Salih, Sarah. *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*. Routledge Publishing: 2005. Print.

Riches et al state that “Women must have turned to Margaret as a role model and a patron for feminine concerns other than childbirth, including sexual continence and faith” due to the fact that “female virginity, is, after all, well known as a concern of the medieval mind” (Riches, Salih 31, 66). However, due to the details of the story that many, including one of its earliest translators, William Caxton, found difficulty accepting as reality, “The cult [of St. Margaret] was officially demoted by the Vatican in 1969, when Margaret was declared unhistorical” (Riches, Salih, 32).

Sands, Tracey R., “Saints and Politics During the Kalmar Period.” *Scandinavian Studies* *World History in Context*. 80. (2008). 141-166. Web. 14 Oct. 2014. Gale Cengage Learning.

Tracey R. Sands has a doctorate in Scandinavian Studies from the University of Washington, as well as a Master's degree in Folklore and Mythology, and has taught at a number of universities throughout the United States, including the University of Colorado. Within “Saints and Politics During the Kalmar Period” Sands studies the use of Saint Margaret in artwork discovered during the Kalmar Period, and her use as a political sign to a singular Swedish lord, essentially. It was through Sands’ work that I first learned that saints are often accompanied by an “attribute […] a visual marker of a saint’s identity, [which are] typically derived from some aspects of the saint’s legend, often the instruments of torture used against him or her, and/or the actual instrument of martyrdom” (Sands 150). Tying the above two concepts together, the founder of the church and Swedish political player used St. Margaret in a starring role, not only with her typical attribute of a “small dragon” but “[wearing] a crown, which is unusual” (Sands, 154). Sands commentary on the many uses of and practice of praying to saints was made clearer through this passage, as I formerly had a limited understanding of why one would pray to or be a “devotee” of the deceased.

“Saints and their images fulfill several different functions for their devotees; [they] may serve as examples of behavior to emulate (or at least aspire to) but also, perhaps even more importantly, as intercessors, who, because of their particular closeness to Christ, can please the case of a devotee. To these two, [Sands] would add that saints serve a symbolic function, as a reference to a person, cause or idea not directly related to the saint’s legend” (Sands 142).

Though Sands seemed to be much more interested in politics and government than the title or her article or abstract led on, Sands did provide me with an invaluable, very small phrase that opened up a great deal of research to me, without which I would have had a great deal of trouble: “*the cult* of the saints” (Sands 147). Initially alarmed by this phrase, as “cult” has rather negative connotations today I did a rough search on the internet to discover that a cult during the Medieval Ages was something else entirely: simply the following of and devotion to a saint. I began to research “the cult of St. Margaret of Antioch” which led to the next source in my research journey.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Salih, Sarah. *Version of Virginity in late Medieval History*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Publishing. 2001.

Salih’s interesting answer to the question of why virginity should be a focus for humankind, is to point back to the Christian creation story: “woman is subject to the curse of Eve, ‘in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thou shalt be under they husband’s power, and he shall have dominion over thee’” (1), as if to say that part of women’s curse is an imprisonment of the gender itself, to be ruled by a father, ruled by a husband and ruled by sons – sexual states of being and equal measure of purity despite having had sex in order to bear children always being under constant scrutiny. It is not the burden of men, the concept of sexual *impurity*, but women’s. Although this is a terrible and unfair (if not fictional) burden, Salih presents an interesting upside to the sexualization of women: the decision to *not* be sexual, and thus remove much of the *power* men and society have, suggesting that in medieval times “women became like men in their choice of virginity [in society]”, as much control of society is lost – there is no pressure to find a husband, to have children, to support a growing family. These women were free to do other things, perhaps earn money, join the church as a nun or produce literature or art. Salih also states that virginity allowed “the possibility that women could practice some form of the *imitatio Christi* with specifically female inflections, and attain[ed] a particularly exalted status in the realm of the spirit” (Salih 8). Despite women’s supposed susceptibility to sexual sin, more common than not were women virgins by choice (although clergy were celibate), women virgins, according to Salih, “attained a particularly exalted status in the realm of the spirit”, meaning that they could become closer to God than non-virgins, due to their “marriage” to God, and refusal of an earthly husband. Therefore there are two reasons why women might be virgins during the medieval period, according to Salih.

Salih goes on to argue that “virginity is more than sexual inexperience; virginity may be conceptualized as a gendered identity [leaning more toward a man’s role, that is, independent] which can be constituted in culturally significant action” (Salih 1). Furthermore the concept of virginity as seen in religious teachings, of the reformed prostitutes and celibate married saints, demonstrates that “a virgin is born even of fornication, but a sacred virgin not even of marriage” (Salih 11). Therefore virginity is fluid concept. Physically, spiritually, socially, there are different meanings and inspirations for the meanings depending on who is making the definition, and when.

Salih was concerned with the idea of virgins being a “third gender” throughout history, due to not fitting into men’s’ roles or women’s role socially, which I thought was interesting but not true, as gender is a complicated definition, and it is likely that the virgins themselves would not have considered themselves anything but female; additionally, the concept was not applicable to Saint Margaret. Salih discussed the definition of virginity, which has proved to be a somewhat complicated answer, or unanswerable, in fact.

Teochimus. “The Life and Passion of St. Margaret.” Ontario: Broadview Press. (2009). 1-13. Print.

Although slight variations in *The Life of St. Margaret* of Antioch exists, a few of which have been mentioned already, the version supposedly recorded by one Teochimus remains the mostly widely read. However, at the end of my research – though I began with Teochimus’ story and end this annotation with it as well – I feel more questions than answers have been uncovered in my study of Saint Margaret. Margaret was supposedly a young woman, a virgin, her devoutness to Jesus Christ causing her to be the object of contempt for her father, who was “a patriarch and prince of heathen people” (Teochimus 2). After being spotted in the field while tending her father’s flock (an allusion to Christ perhaps?) by a “child of the devil”, Olibrius, in this rendition referred to as “the ruler of the land, who condemned and destroyed all the followers of the living God” is bent upon either having her “as my wife [or] as a concubine” (Teochimus 3). A number of paragraphs pass with the villain asking and torturing the poor girl, as she continues to speak of her love of Christ, saying such things to infuriate him as, “I, a maiden, have given him [Christ] my maidenhood, and love him as a beloved and believe in him as Lord” (Teochimus 3).

Most interestingly, and what may very well set her apart from other saints, is the incarnation of the devil as a dragon while she is imprisoned: “Suddenly there came towards her out of a corner a devil from hell in the form of a dragon” (Teochimus 5). The devil-dragon swallows her hole, but as Margaret’s makes the sign of the cross (right before he consumes her or while in his stomach, texts cannot agree), “his body burst in two down the middle” and the woman emerges from between the halves unscathed (Teochimus 6). After this the dragon is swallowed back up into hell, but Margaret is not alone for long – shortly after a demon arrives to talk with her about “What [she] wished to know: where we [demons] most live, and why we most hate and harry maidens” – that is, because “through the power of maidenhood [virginity] was mankind redeemed [“by the heavenly queen”], and all that we owned taken and bereft us” (Teochimus 9). How shocking it is to the moral of this tale, as I learned in later research, that most of this demonic monologue was added by a monk, most likely, writing to nuns. As much of Margaret’s tale that remains without it, that is brave and admirable, it is a bit insulting to boil it down to a girl’s virginity. The story of Saint Margaret should be celebrated as one of devotion to God, and also, empowerment of women to stand on their own, both physically and spiritually.

Analysis of Excerpts from *Saint Margaret*

Despite the focus of *The Life of Saint Margaret* on her overcoming a dragon, a demon and torture (if one considers martyrdom overcoming, as Margaret seemed to) the monologue of the demon focuses on virginity. I now know, thanks to Bledsoe, that most of this was propagated to nuns. Despite all Margaret’s strength and devotion, she is still seen as inferior because she is a woman. Even the demon is disturbed at being overcome by a woman: Margaret “[takes] firmly by his hideous hair, heaved him up, and dashed him right down on the earth [and] set her right foot on his rough neck” – is overcome with shame that a *woman* has treated him thus, saying, “What will become of me? If only this were because of a man – but it is because of a maiden” (Teochimus 9). Even if one could argue that the monk who propagated the monologue cared for the women he was writing to – why tell them they are inferior in so many ways? Why is “maidenhood the queen of all virtues” (Teochimus 10)? Why has history been obsessed with virginity since the creation of religion?

Margaret said, “He has set his mark on me with his seal; neither life nor death can divide us from one another […] [I] love him as a beloved” (Teochimus 4, 3). This is a strong reference to the Song of Solomon, authored by King Solomon, son of King David, slayer of the giant Goliath. This book of the bible is known to be an analogy of God with his servants, a love story between them, in which the servant says, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is as strong as death” (Song of Solomon 8:6). Is it merely a coincidence that the same man whom Margaret quotes, or alludes to, is the same man whom the demon claims once imprisoned him? The demon bewails, “Do not cast me down into hell. For Solomon the wise, while he lived here, contained us in a vessel” (Teochimus 9). The demon goes on to tell a blurb of a story that involves being set free by Babylonians and going forth, wreaking havoc throughout the world. It would be an interesting story to trace back from this moment: that the young woman who uses Solomon’s words speaks to a demon that Solomon bound.

Christ says to Margaret: “Wherever your body or any of your bones may be, or a book of your suffering, if a sinful man come and put his lips to it, I will heal him of his sins, and no devil shall remain in any dwelling where the book of your martyrdom is kept” (Teochimus 11). I find this to be the most unbelievable part of Margaret’s story. Margaret herself talks about the love she has for Christ, and the love Christ has for her, and all his followers: “You are the foster-father and father to helpless children” and believes that Christ says to her “Come now, bride, to your bridegroom” (which is an analogy very much seen in the Song of Solomon) (Teochimus 5, 11). I do not believe, therefore that Christ would hand over to her the prayers of his followers. I feel it is uncharacteristic, if Christ is as jealous for the love of Margaret, as a “bridegroom” might be, and for his followers as Margaret believes he is, that he would have anyone be an intercessor except himself (Christ the intercessor between the follower and God). Creating mini-gods out of the saints is no different than the demi-gods of ancient Greek and Rome. Perhaps here is further propaganda and means of control by that of the monks and of the Catholic Church, as a means of social control: follow God’s laws unquestionably and “you will rule with [God] over all that [He] possesses” (Teochumus, 11).

Winstead, Karen. *Virgin Martyrs*. New York: Cornell University. 1997. Print.

The second burst of research focusing on the life and death of Saint Margaret was inspired by the questions I posed after reading Jenny Bledsoe’s article “The Cult of St. Margaret of Antioch at Tarrant Crawford: The Saint’s Didactic Body and its Resonance for Religious Women”: Why, in a spiritual world where demons exist, is female virginity so essential to a woman’s worth and salvation? Also, what is the obsession with virginity even to the present day? Winstead encouraged this focus by asserting that “virgin martyrs, more than any other type of saints, appear to have captured the imagination” (Winstead 3)

I began to focus on the relationship of virginity and spirituality. Dr. Karen Winstead of Ohio State University has authored two books on the subject of virgin martyrs and virginity as a separate surprisingly fluid concept, depending on history. Winstead produced a helpful “recipe” for the typical virgin martyr legends:

“Many of the most standard ingredients of virgin martyr legends are found in the accounts of most early Christian martyrs: the saint refuses to participate in pagan sacrifices, debates her antagonist, affirm the fundamental tennents of Christianity, destroys idols, performs miracles, and endures excruciating torments” (Winstead 5).

The one “ingredient” that Saint Margaret does not have is destroying an idol; one could argue that by refusing to be joined a pagan man, Olibrius, she, by extension, “refuses to participate in pagan activity, as Winstead lists. Margaret preaches “the tennents of Christianity”, performs the miracle of emerging from the dragon and, indeed, endures six “excruciating torments”, including, being stripped naked and beaten with “cruel rods”, scourged, “cruelly hanged and with sharp swords and flesh-hooks of iron […] was cut [and] torn”, is “burned with burning tapers” and “bound hand and foot and thrown to the bottom [of] a vat full of water” (Teochimus 4, 10).

But Winstead clarifies after, “What distinguishes the legends of most female martyrs from those of their male counterparts is a preoccupation with gender and sexuality. Almost all virgin martyr legends dramatize some threat to the saint’s virginity” (Winstead 6). This is true of Margaret’s story, for after each of the six agonizing tortures, some that “tore at her so that neither the evil ruler nor anyone else there could bear to look at her out of horror because of the great rush of blood”, Olibrius, still, is after her virginity, saying, “Submit now and render obeisance to me” so that he may, as originally planned , “hold her as my wife [or] choose her as a concubine” (Teochimus 3).

Winstead remains concerned with the definition and purpose of a virgin martyrs during the medieval period. Although there is an obvious unnatural emphasis on sexuality/virginity in young women’s story of martyrdom (assuming they’re virgins), Winstead’s approach is, overall, convinced that the emphasis was a healthy one, that,

“As the most vulnerable and carnal of human beings – the virgin martyrs testify that the flesh can indeed triumph over corporeal desires, that weakness can prevail over strength, Their bodies, torn and made whole, replicate the miracle of the Eucharist. The paradox of the virgins’ triumph is distilled in their emblems, where instruments designed to erase identity are used to proclaim identity” (Winstead 12).

I am not convinced of this perspective due to previous readings by Bledsoe, but also due to the writing of Kelly and Salih, which present a darker side to the manipulation of the idea of virginity and spirituality by the church – and example of this I have already seen, as it was discovered when reading Bledsoe’s work that a monk *added* the demon’s entire monologue about the importance of chastity, or the importance of being chaste, or virginal.

1. That is the original fallen angel, Satan or Lucifer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The alphabetized order of sources does not reflect the order in which they were analyzed. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)