

# Visual Imagery and Representations of Audience in Three Medieval Accounts of the Life of Saint Margaret

## Project Description:

Medieval saints' lives were written and re-written over centuries for different audiences. While the story of a particular saint follows the same overall narrative pattern, there is a great deal of variation in the way that narrative is expressed. For my senior thesis, I was interested in how medieval hagiography conveys visual imagery and, in particular, how writers shape the imagery of female martyrdom for different audiences. To explore these questions, I examined three versions of the life of St. Margaret, from the 11th, 13th, and 14th centuries. A close look at these three texts sheds light on the complex relationships between scribes, audiences, religious figures, and representation.

## Evidence:

- In the examples to the right, the narrator explains why the Life of St. Margaret is relevant for the reader. In all three versions, the text is established as imperative to heighten the audience's devotion to God.
- In the first text, the male narrator provides the male audience with a model of masculinity in relation to a female religious figure. Theotimus' desire of Margaret is holy and purely educational, whereas Olibrius' sinful desire is sexual and material. The figure of Theotimus draws in the male monks to view Margaret appropriately as the embodiment of physical sacrifice for God.
- In the Katherine Group, Theotimus' role is peripheral as there is no gender barrier; however it is clear in this excerpt that the audience is supposed to identify with Margaret while recognizing at the same time that she is an ideal model and symbolizes a devotion to God that is superior to their own.
- In the Auchinleck Manuscript, the Life of St. Margaret the audience is distanced from Margaret in the initial introduction, which sets the stage for the men in the audience to identify with Olibrius and the women with the "group of women". It is accepted that the audience is not enclosed and therefore tempted to sin. Instead of presenting them with ideal figures, the text relates them to sinful figures as a way for them to acknowledge and atone for their sins.

## Conclusion:

In these three versions of the Life of St. Margaret, the characterization of the title character remains largely the same. However, the three texts represent visual images and the response of the audience in the text in very different ways. In each of the texts, the characters present at Margaret's martyrdom - Theotimus, Olibrius, the crowd - respond to the saint's suffering in different ways, and their responses provide a model for the manuscripts' intended audiences. I argue that in the mid to late Middle Ages scribes shaped the Life of St. Margaret according to how characters within the text view the saint; the audience is a far more dynamic figure than the saint herself, who remains a figure of constant feminine devotion.

To draw connections between the audience within the text and readers of the text, I define visual imagery in two different ways. First, there are the images that the audience within the text responds to as evidence of God's grace; these images are not always described in detail for the reader of the manuscript, particularly when the text places emphasis on the audience's response to those images. Second, there is the descriptive writing that conveys a particular image to the manuscript's reader; these are the moments when the reader is positioned as an audience for Margaret's suffering. The related acts of viewing St. Margaret either directly or through the perspective of the internal audience is tailored to the social rank, gender, and mode of living of the external audience.

This focus on visual imagery allows a deeper understanding of how the genre of hagiography was adapted for various audiences in medieval England and the ways that saints' lives were understood to model religious devotion. The three manuscripts reveal different perspectives on how different scribes thought visual and textual experiences might ignite deeper faith, but each of the three manuscripts emphasizes the relationship between the internal and the external audience. I conclude that the three manuscripts present Margaret as a stagnant figure and pay close attention to the surrounding figures, with whom the manuscript audience can identify. By acknowledging the significance of the figures surrounding the saint, the Life of St. Margaret becomes accessible for different audiences.

## Cotton Tiberius:

- Manuscript: Cotton Tiberius
- Date: 1050
- Scribe: Christian monks
- Audience: Christian monks
- Historical Context: Monks withdrew from secular society to lead an intensely prayer-oriented, ascetic and Eucharist-focused life.

### 1. Cotton Tiberius:

"I, Theotimus, desired earnestly to know how the blessed Margaret fought the devil and overcame him and received the eternal crown of glory from God. Listen and understand how the blessed Margaret suffered for God's name."

### 2. Katherine Group:

"Listen, all you who have ears and hearing, widows along with the wedded! And maidens especially listen very carefully to how they must love the living Lord and live in maidenhood, which is the power most beloved to him."

### 3. Auchinleck:

"All those who are in deadly sin and intend to seek mercy, believe in Christ that gave you wit to atone for your sins. Listen and you shall hear told with words fair and sweet, the life of a maiden men call Saint Margaret."

## Katherine Group:

- Manuscript: Bodley 34; Royal 17 A XXVII
- Date: 1220
- Scribe: male religious scribe from the East Midlands
- Audience: Anchoresses
- Historical Context: An anchoress is a religious woman who chose to live in seclusion in a cell, connected to a Church. This text provided them with a daily guide to conduct and prayer.

## Auchinleck:

- Manuscript: Auchinleck
- Date: 1330
- Scribe: 5 professional copyists,
- Audience: upper-lay strata men, women
- Historical Context: This was the first commercial manuscript produced in a workshop in London. The audience was composed of wealthy but not aristocratic families, most likely part of the aspirant mercantile classes.