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Women, knowledge and gardens in John Capgrave's *Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria*

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Saint Katherine was one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages and was renowned for her exceptional education. John Capgrave wrote his *Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria* in East Anglia in the 1440s. The episode in Capgrave's text in which Katherine is converted to Christianity is set in a private garden. While Capgrave attempts to associate Katherine with the Virgin Mary, the setting encourages associations with the Garden of Eden, Eve and the Fall. Eve's sin was seen as prime evidence for the rightness of the subjection of women and of preventing them from preaching, teaching and speaking in public. The underlying tensions regarding women alluded to by means of the garden setting are explored.

Vroue, kennis en tuine in John Capgrave se *Lewe van Sint Katherine van Alexandria*

Sint Katherine was een van die populêrste heiliges van die Middeleeue en het veral roem verwerf vir haar uitsonderlike geleerdheid. John Capgrave het sy *Lewe van Sint Katherine van Alexandria* in Oos-Anglia in die 1440s geskryf. Die episode in Capgrave se teks waarin Katherine 'n Christen word, vind in haar privaattuin plaas. Alhoewel Capgrave probeer om Katherine met die Heilige Maagd te assosieer, moedig die tuinomgewing die leser aan om dit in verband te bring met die Paradystuin, Eva en die sondeval. Eva se sonde is gesien as die vernaamste bewys dat die onderwerping van vroue regverdig was en dat hulle daarom nie toegelaat is om in die publiek te praat, te preek of te onderrig nie. Die onderliggende spanning oor vroue waarna die tuinomgewing verwys, word ondersoek.

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St Katherine of Alexandria was a young Egyptian queen who was renowned for her exceptional education and her status as a bride of Christ.[1] She was the patron saint of preachers, schools, scholars, universities, wheelwrights, millers, spinsters and young girls, among others (Apostolos-Cappadona 1998: 66-8, Loxton 1999: 19). Her cult enjoyed immense popularity in the Middle Ages, partly due to her great learning and royal status (Winstead 1999: 3).

John Capgrave wrote his *Life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria* in East Anglia in the 1440s and it may well be the most elaborate and lengthy version of her legend produced in either Latin or a vernacular language, during the Middle Ages (Seymour 1996: 237, Winstead 1999: 3). His rendition generally follows the traditional form of the legend and runs in essence as follows: Katherine was a young Egyptian princess whose exceptional education far exceeded what any medieval woman could hope to have the opportunity to attain. Her father had a palace built with an enclosed garden where she could carry out her studies. High walls surrounded the garden and only Katherine had a key (1.302-1.364). When she was about eighteen years old, her father died and she became queen. The lords in her parliament wanted her to marry as soon as possible so that they could have a king to rule the country. As she wished to remain a virgin and to pursue a life of study, she used her superior education and rhetorical skills to out-argue them. Soon afterwards the Virgin Mary sent the hermit Adrian to Katherine. With divine assistance he entered Katherine's private garden and converted her to Christianity. A short while later she experienced her mystical marriage to Christ, after which she returned to her life of study. One day she heard a great commotion and discovered that Emperor Maxentius of Rome had entered Alexandria and was forcing her people to offer pagan sacrifices. She confronted him and denounced paganism. He called for the fifty most learned philosophers in his kingdom to confound her, but she eventually converted them all to Christianity. With divine aid she resisted Maxentius's attempts to convert, torture or subdue her. One instrument of torture, designed especially to be used against her, was the

1 This article has been developed from a paper (taken from my UFS PhD thesis) presented at the UNISA Medieval Association Symposium on 19 September 2005. My thanks to my PhD supervisor, Prof M M Raftery, and the symposium delegates for the helpful comments and insights offered.

spiked wheel. However, it was shattered by the power of God, killing a number of pagan spectators. When Katherine was eventually beheaded, milk ran from her neck as an indication of her purity. (The spiked wheel, the sword with which she was beheaded, the crown which indicates her royal status, and the book which indicates her learning all became attributes of her iconography.) Angels took her body and buried it on Mount Sinai where healing oil emanated from her grave.

A woman acquiring knowledge in a garden features at one of the most important turning points in Christianity: the Fall, where Eve learns the knowledge imparted by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, a scene often presented in the art of the Middle Ages. However, medieval Christian art also often placed the Virgin Mary in a garden in representations of the Annunciation as well as in depictions of her with the Christ Child. The episode in Capgrave's text in which Katherine is converted to Christianity is set in her private walled garden. In the text St Katherine is associated with these two important female figures in Christianity. While her links with Mary are made explicit by Capgrave, her connections with Eve are frequently less obvious. Eve has a notorious relationship with knowledge in Christian dogma while, through Christ, Mary's relation to knowledge is usually expressed in a far more positive light. As a result, the ways in which St Katherine is associated with Mary and Eve have important consequences for her own perceived involvement with learning and knowledge. The ways in which the garden setting allows Capgrave to bolster admiration for Katherine as a saint by associating her with the Virgin Mary, while simultaneously revealing an uneasiness with Katherine's exceptional education through allusions to Eden, Eve and the Fall, will be explored here.

Throughout Capgrave's text St Katherine is closely associated with the Virgin Mary in a number of ways. In Book One (1.177-1.189) he associates her birth to elderly parents with Biblical and apocryphal characters famous for having a child (often destined for important spiritual work) in their old age, such as Abraham and Sarah (the parents of Isaac), Zechariah and Elizabeth (the parents of John the Baptist), and Joachim and Anne (the parents of the Virgin Mary herself). He also notes that, like the Virgin, St Katherine is born to non-Christian parents like a rose growing from a thorny bramble:

Oute of the harde thorn brymbyl-tree
Growyth the fresch rose, as men may see;
So sprong oure Lady oute of the Jewys
And Kateryne of hethen, this tale ful trew is.
(1.53-1.56)

Capgrave draws attention to the similarities between the hermit Adrian's "appearance" to Katherine in her private garden and the angel Gabriel's appearance to the Virgin Mary. When Adrian appears before Katherine he addresses her: "All heyll, madame!" (3.413). This greeting echoes Gabriel's "Hail, Mary" at the Annunciation (cf Luke 1:28, Winstead 1999: 299).[2] The connection with the Annunciation is made clearer later in Book Three (3.465-3.476) where Capgrave directly associates Adrian with Gabriel, and Katherine with Mary (Winstead 1999: 299):

…Cryst had made His horde
Or this ermyte [Adrian] cam and leyd His grete tresoure
Ryght in hir [Katherine's] hert, emprended full sore, impressed
For thow He sent the ermyte as his messangere,
Or the ermyte cam, Crist Himself was there,

Ryght as Gabriell whan he fro hevene was sent
Onto oure Lady to do that hye message.
Into Nazareth in forme of o man he went,
Fayre and fresch and yong eke of age,
But ere that he cam onto this maydes cage,
Cryst was there, as we in bokes rede.
Ryth so dyd He here, if we wyll take hede.
(3.465-3.476)

The fact that Adrian approaches Katherine while she is studying in her private walled garden is significant (3.307-3.322 and 3.376-3.392). The image of the enclosed garden or *hortus conclusus* is symbolic of Mary's eternal virginity. This symbol is derived from the Song of Songs (4:12), "Mi sister spousesse, a gardyn closid togidere; a gardyn closid togidere, a welle aseelid". In northern medieval art the enclosed garden became the setting for the Virgin and Child, indicating that paradise was to be restored by means of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection. In medieval art the enclosed garden was also frequently the setting for the Annunciation and sometimes for the Nativity as well (Apostolos-

2 All Biblical references and quotations are taken from the John Wycliffe translation of the Bible available at the Wesley Center Online: Wesley Center for Applied Theology (Northwest Nazarene University, 1993-2005).

Cappadona 1998: 121). As a result, the enclosed garden associates St Katherine with the Virgin Mary and the Virgin Birth of Christ and thus serves to draw further attention to, and to accentuate, St Katherine's own purity and virginity. Indeed, the name Katherine comes from the Greek *katharos* which means "pure" (Foreman 1967: 220). In addition, a further connection may be observed in that Adrian's "annunciation" of Christianity results in Katherine's conversion, which leads to the "Virgin Birth" of many converts, who may be seen as her spiritual children.

According to the *Middle English Dictionary* a "gardin" is a "cultivated piece of land (large or small, usually enclosed) for vegetables, herbs, flowers, trees, etc.", but figuratively it may refer to "the soul" or "heart", while Christ's garden refers to "the world" (Kuhn 1963: 31). Consequently, Katherine's enclosed garden, to which she alone has a key and where she spends her time in solitary study (1.337-1.364), may be seen as symbolic not only of her virginity but also of the purity of her heart and soul.

Katherine is studying when Adrian approaches her (3.376-3.378). This connects her more closely with visual representations of the Annunciation, in which Mary is frequently presented reading a book, representing both her foreknowledge that Christ was born to die during her lifetime (thus making her acquiescence to God's request a more significant sacrifice) and her role as the "seat of wisdom" or *sedes sapientiae* (Apostolos-Cappadona 1998: 18 and 52, Ferguson 1961: 73). The book thus also serves as a reminder of Christ, referred to as "the Word" in John 1:1-18. In addition, the book is one of St Katherine's attributes symbolising her great learning (Ferguson 1961: 171). She appears in a painting from c. 1440/1460 (Figure 1), by the Master of Flémalle and his assistants, in an enclosed garden with the Virgin and the Christ Child as well as St Barbara, John the Baptist and Anthony Abbot (Ferguson 1961: plate 111). The Virgin is seated in the centre with the Christ Child on her lap. To their left we see St Barbara with a tower (one of her attributes) behind her, and Anthony Abbot holding a staff. To the right of the Virgin and Child we have John the Baptist, holding a lamb, and the seated Katherine with a sword and wheel. She is reading a book which lies on her lap. Consequently, in this scene, St Katherine may also recall the image of Mary at the Annunciation. In addition, the book in her lap parallels the Christ Child in Mary's lap. The garden is quite tightly enclosed and rather ornate but flowers and small plants appear in the foreground.

Figure 1: *Madonna and Child with Saints in the Enclosed Garden* by the Master of Flémalle (also known as Robert Campin) and his assistants (or one of his followers) *c* 1440/1460. National Gallery, Washington, DC[3]

These associations with Mary serve to place St Katherine in a positive spiritual light; however, other references to Mary also serve to recall Eve. In Romans 5:12-21 St Paul presents Christ as the "Second Adam" who reverses the sin of the first Adam:

> Therfor as bi o man synne entride in to this world, and bi synne deth, and so deth passide forth in to alle men, in which man alle men synneden. [...] But deth regnyde from Adam til to Moises, also in to hem that synneden not in licnesse of the trespassyng of Adam, the which is licnesse of Crist to comynge. [...] For if in the gilt of oon deth regnede thorouy oon, myche more men that takyn plente of grace, and of yyuyng, and of riytwisnesse, schulen regne in lijf bi oon Jhesu Crist. Therfor as bi the gilt of oon in to alle men in to condempnacioun, so bi the riytwisnesse of oon in to alle men in to iustifiyng of lijf.
>
> (Romans 5:12, 14, 17-18)

3 <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?45605+0+0+gg39>

This idea was elaborated upon by Justin Martyr (c 100-c 165) and Irenaeus (d c 202) to incorporate the Virgin Mary as the "Second Eve", the mother of the living in a new and spiritual way (Warner 2000: 59) versus Eve, the mother of humankind in the fleshly or physical sense. In the late Middle Ages there was much interest in exploring the contrasts between Eve and Mary, often by means of a comparison of the Fall and the Annunciation (O'Reilly 1992: 190). For example, in the predella panel painted by Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia, the Sienese master, in about 1445 (Figure 2), Adam and Eve are shown being evicted from paradise (to the viewer's left), while in the foreground, in a pavilion in the same garden, Mary is portrayed at the Annunciation (Warner 2000: 61).

The story of the Creation and the Fall in Genesis has, of course, often been used to support women's subordination because woman was seen as being created "derivatively" and considered to be responsible for tempting man into sin (Brueggemann 1982: 50). It is small wonder, then, that women's speech was attacked, especially in the highly religious Middle Ages. Christian instruction was circumspect about permitting women to take part in public speaking. Owing to the belief that sin had entered the world as a result of the words of a woman, women's speech as a whole was perceived as being hazardous (Leyser 2001: 61). As St Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:11-14:

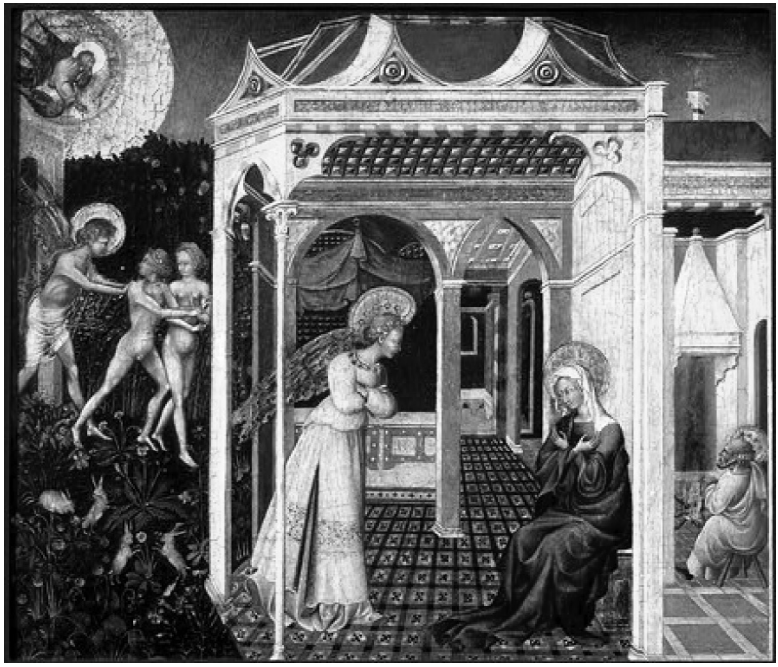
> A womman lerne in silence, with al subieccioun. But Y suffre not a womman to teche, nether to haue lordschip on the hosebonde, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, aftirward Eue; and Adam was not disseyued, but the womman was disseyued, in breking of the lawe.

According to St Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*, Book XIV, chapter 11, Dods 1886: 272), Adam would not have been misled by the serpent as Eve was and it was only out of a sense of solidarity that he took part in her sin. Thus the serpent tempted Eve as she was "weaker" and more susceptible to sin:

> … we cannot believe that Adam was deceived, and supposed the devil's word to be truth, and therefore transgressed God's law, but that he by the drawings of kindred yielded to the woman, the husband to the wife, the one human being to the only other human being.

Augustine associated her supposed "weakness" with a sort of mental inadequacy: "Although they were not both deceived by credulity, yet both were entangled in the snares of the devil, and taken by sin" (Book

Figure 2: *The Annunciation* by Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia 1445 National Gallery, Washington, DC[4]



XIV, chapter 11, Dods 1886: 272). With such a negative view of the nature of women prevailing, it is unsurprising that some objected to women receiving an advanced education.

The tradition of discouraging education for women meant there was little reason for a woman to advance beyond the study of letters to rhetoric or philosophy as she was not permitted to teach publicly (Ferrante 1980: 12). However, in Book One (1.246-1.434) of Capgrave's text we are told in detail about Katherine's impressive academic education, which included the study of Latin, Greek (1.274) and the Seven Liberal Arts (1.365-1.399). As women were excluded from institutions of higher edu-

4 <http://www.aug.edu/augusta/iconography/nationalGallery/annunciationGrazia.html>

cation such as universities, the rigorous liberal arts education which Katherine is described as receiving would not have been available to them (Winstead 1999: 291). After her conversion Katherine adds theology — which she teaches publicly — to her list of accomplishments (4.43-4.70). As a result, her education is quite comprehensive by medieval standards and would have been comparable to that of an educated member of the clergy. Thus St Katherine is a noteworthy female character in medieval literature as she is presented as being highly intelligent and extremely learned. Indeed, Capgrave states:

> For of all the scoleris that are now or were
> Sche is hem above …
>
> (1.249-1.250)

Although he makes sure to point out the superiority of God's knowledge and wisdom over that of humans, saying: "Oure witte onto His witte is but a gnast" (1.159) or spark, it is not hard to imagine that St Katherine's remarkable education may have caused some anxiety to those in power. As Katherine Lewis (2000: 8) notes, there are a number of aspects of St Katherine's life, such as her education, which provide "potentially problematic models of religious and social conduct, perhaps particularly for women".

Although Capgrave appears to make a concerted effort to associate Katherine with the Virgin Mary, the association of Katherine's conversion with the Annunciation by means of the enclosed garden means that the associated and frequently contrasted image of Eve (and the Tree of Knowledge) in the Garden of Eden is also recalled. From this point of view the fact that Katherine is studying, and consequently adding to her already extensive and impressive education (1.246-1.434), serves to remind the reader of the Fall, where Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree in order to gain knowledge. Both Eve and Katherine are thus presented in a garden setting in their pursuit of knowledge. As we see in Genesis 3:4-6 it was, in part, Eve's desire for knowledge that led to the Fall:

> Forsothe the serpent seide to the womman, ye schulen not die bi deeth; for whi God woot that in what euere dai ye schulen ete therof, youre iyen schulen be opened, and ye schulen be as Goddis, knowynge good and yuel. Therfore the womman seiy that the tre was good, and swete to ete, and fair to the iyen, and delitable in bi holdyng; and sche took of the fruyt therof, and eet, and yaf to hir hosebande, and he eet.

As a woman, Katherine's desire for knowledge could, therefore, also be seen as potentially dangerous. For instance, in the marriage parliament in Book Two she out-argues her lords in order to remain unmarried and, as a result, to rule the land alone. As a soon-to-be Christian virgin martyr in a legend, this behaviour is admirable. In the sociopolitical reality, a woman publicly arguing her case against the patriarchal powers, and possibly putting the safety of the country and its subjects in jeopardy, would have been frowned upon.

As the first garden and the site of the Fall, the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-3:24) would certainly be recalled by a Christian reader of any spiritual text featuring a garden. In addition, the contrasts often drawn between the Fall and the Annunciation would make the association of the enclosed garden and the Garden of Eden likely. Katherine's garden

> [...] was made and ordeynd at hir owyn devyse.
> There wold sche ly sumtyme, stody and wryght.
> It was sett full of trees, and that in straunge wyse [...]
>
> (1.345-1.347)

This garden would have evoked the "original garden", the Garden of Eden, as described in Genesis 2:8-9:

> Forsothe the Lord God plauntide at the bigynnyng paradis of likyng, wherynne he settide man whom he hadde formed. And the Lord God brouyte forth of the erthe ech tre fair in siyt, and swete to ete; also he brouyte forth the tre of lijf in the middis of paradis, and the tre of kunnyng of good and of yuel.

The association of Katherine's garden with Eden, particularly the shared references to trees and knowledge or study, makes an interpretation of the conversion scene in terms of the Fall, rather than in terms of Capgrave's preferred interpretation based on the Annunciation, possible. Katherine is approached by Adrian in the enclosed garden in a way which could also recall the manner in which Eve was approached by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Adrian enters her garden, speaks to her and persuades her to leave her gods and adopt Christianity (3.442-3.777) in a manner similar to that in which the serpent persuades Eve to ignore God's command and to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3:1-5). Both the serpent and Adrian make effective use of language: however, Adrian's eloquence is provided by God Himself, as

Mary informed Adrian it would be (3.320-3.336). This time, instead of being led into sin, the female character is led from paganism to Christianity and thus, in the medieval Christian view, to salvation. The scene may, therefore, be seen as a reversal of the Fall, just as Mary was represented as reversing the Fall at the Annunciation. In this way St Katherine may also be seen as a "new Eve" and is associated with Mary, the ultimate example in medieval Christianity of the good, virginal woman.

The Garden of Eden may also be considered to be symbolic of the Virgin Birth as God created life there through His power without making use of normal animal reproduction. Indeed, when Katherine questions the idea of the Virgin Birth, Adrian uses the creation of Eve from Adam's side as an example which proves that it is possible for God to do so (3.645-3.654), saying:

> Wythouten seed, lady, or wythoutyn synne
> May God make a man, and so He dede or now:
> For if we at Adam or at Eve begyne,
> It is full pleyn for to schew onto yow.
> For whan that same Adam slept in a swow,
> Oure Lord owte of his side than made Eve.
> Than be this ensaumple pleynly may ye preve,
>
> Sith that He made a virgyne of a man,
> He was of powere eke for to make
> A man of a virgyne [...]
>
> (3. 645-3.654)

Thus Eden (and by association, the Fall) and the Virgin Birth (part of the reversal of the Fall) are directly and specifically connected and contrasted in this scene.

As we have observed, Katherine is associated with the Virgin Mary in a number of ways in Capgrave's text. They are both, for instance, famed for their purity and virginity, symbolised in this text by the enclosed garden. They are further linked by the echoes of the Annunciation created when Adrian goes to convert Katherine to Christianity. Katherine's virginity and the fact that she is studying in her enclosed garden when Adrian approaches her with the message of Christianity connect her with Mary and thus with Christ, the Word, as a "good body of knowledge" and the "good news" of the Redemption. The allusions to her associations with Eve and her "bad body of knowledge" (and the negative occurrence of the Fall) may, however, have echoed (or even

raised) concerns in the minds of some readers as to the appropriateness (for a woman) of Katherine's impressive education. Indeed, Eve's sin was seen as prime evidence for the rightness of the subjection of women and of preventing them from preaching, teaching and speaking in public, and this was used as a pretext for excluding women from a comprehensive academic education. Thus, while St Katherine was an excellent example of virginity and of Christian martyrdom she was also potentially "dangerous" as she could serve as an equally striking example to women in terms of her education and forceful eloquence.

As a result, the connections between Eve and Katherine are generally reversed by Capgrave and consequently serve to align Katherine more closely with Mary. In addition, before she begins her debate with the fifty learned philosophers, Katherine announces that she has rejected her pagan authors (such as Aristotle, Homer, Ovid, Galen and Plato) in favour of Christianity as she could find no fruit in them but eloquence (4.1324-4.1400):

> I hafe left all my auctoures olde,
> I fonde noo frute in hem but eloquens.
> My bokes be go, goven or elles solde.
> …
> And in these bokes no othyr thing fond I
> But vanyté or thing that schall not lest.
> And evyr me thowte that swech lernyng was best
> That tretyth of thing whech evyr schall endure.
> Swech thing lerne I now, turned to Criste Jhesu …
>
> (4.1324-4.1326 and 4.1349-4.1353)

She apparently continues to use what "fruit" she did find in them to a virtuous end, as she argues eloquently for the Christian faith. In these ways Capgrave attempts to neutralise the potential threat that some may have perceived in this woman's public use of her education.

In conclusion, although Capgrave attempts to associate St Katherine with the Virgin Mary and thus to add to the admiration she deserved as a saint, the garden setting of the conversion scene serves as a reminder of the Garden of Eden, Eve and the Fall, thereby revealing an underlying uneasiness with the exceptional level of education that Katherine, as a woman, had achieved. The garden setting thus not only frames, but also elicits, a consideration of the true nature of this woman, and perhaps of women in general.

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