

'ERAT ABIGAIL MULIER PRUDENTISSIMA': GILBERT  
OF TOURNAI AND ATTITUDES TO FEMALE  
SANCTITY IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

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For many people in the Middle Ages it was the belief in the intercessory powers of saints at the court of heaven which drove individual acts of veneration.<sup>1</sup> However, saints were not just sources of assistance in times of need; they could also be perceived as role models both for those who wanted to live a religious life and for the broader laity. Not surprisingly, the lessons drawn from a particular saint's life tended to reflect individual attitudes and beliefs, and the same saint could be used to justify contradictory forms of behaviour. This paper examines two contrasting responses to the cult of St Katherine of Alexandria and what they tell us about attitudes to women and female sanctity in the thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

These contradictory interpretations of Katherine's life derive from the complex nature of her *Passio*. In many ways it is no different from other martyr stories with its tale of a Christian virgin executed by a Roman emperor, and it was her chastity and her martyrdom which constituted Katherine's claim to sanctity.<sup>3</sup> However, the *Passio* also presents Katherine as an educated and powerful woman. In one of the most well-known passages she makes a public defence of her faith against fifty pagan philosophers, converting them all to Christianity. Katherine's cult was growing in popularity in the thirteenth century, and explaining

<sup>1</sup> A good general introduction to saints as intercessors is B. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000–1215*, rev. edn (Aldershot, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Katherine is supposed to have died c. 305 but there is no evidence that she ever existed. Her *Passio* probably dates from the eighth century. For a discussion of the origins of her cult, see C. Walsh, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe* (Aldershot, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Her intercessory powers are emphasized in the earliest versions of the *Passio* when, as she is led out to her execution, Katherine prays that whosoever shall pray for assistance in her name shall have their prayers answered and a heavenly voice is heard granting her request. See, e.g., the tenth-century Greek *Passio* by Simeon Metaphrastes published by J.-P. Migne with a Latin translation by Surius (PG 116, 275–302).

why it was acceptable for her to preach was a problem for the medieval Church, which wanted to reserve preaching to licensed male preachers.<sup>4</sup> Hence we can see that as Katherine joins the holy dead, sanctified by her virginal martyrdom, she also presents an example of a woman acting beyond the role usually assigned to women. It is this dichotomy which goes to the heart of differing attitudes to the saint. At one and the same time she is the model of a chaste holy woman and of an unconventional spirituality. The medieval Church sought to resolve this dichotomy by representing Katherine in traditional terms, emphasizing her virginity and obedience to Christ as the attributes to be followed by other women. In contrast, her preaching was represented as an exception to the norm, a unique gift from the Holy Spirit to her alone.<sup>5</sup>

One way in which the Church constructed its representation of Katherine was through sermons. However, although there is a large and growing body of work on sermons and preaching, little work has been done on sermons about St Katherine.<sup>6</sup> The starting point for any analysis of sermons remains the comprehensive collection contained in Schneyer's *Repertorium*.<sup>7</sup> Using a sample of 183 sermons by named authors all dated before 1350 and identified by Schneyer as being on the theme of St Katherine, it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions. The most common incipit text used is Psalm 44: 14 [45: 13], 'All the glory of the king's daughter is within golden borders', which occurs in ten sermons.<sup>8</sup> A further six sermons use other texts from Psalm 44 [45] as their starting point. This psalm is full of royal imagery, which,

<sup>4</sup> See A. Blamires, 'Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy, Heresy and Saints' Lives', *Viator* 26 (1995), 135–52.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Magdalene was the other saint associated with female preaching and similar attempts were made to show her as an exception. See K. L. Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), esp. ch. 2; Blamires, 'Women and Preaching', 141–5; R. Rusconi, 'Women's Sermons at the End of the Middle Ages: Texts from the Blessed and Images of the Saints', in B. M. Kienzle and P. J. Walker, eds, *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley, CA, 1998), 173–95, esp. 179–82.

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to recent historiography on sermons, see C. Muessig, 'Sermon, Preacher and Society in the Middle Ages', *JMedH* 28 (2002), 73–91.

<sup>7</sup> J. B. Schneyer, *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters für die Zeit von 1150–1350*, 11 vols (Munich, 1969–90), 2: 282–318.

<sup>8</sup> All biblical quotations are from the Latin Vulgate. Those in English are from the Challoner revision of the Douai-Reims translation of the Latin Vulgate. Where the Authorized Version reference differs, it is given in parentheses.

given that Katherine is always portrayed as a princess in art and literature, might be thought appropriate. However, the imagery stresses female beauty, not intelligence, and its use can be seen as another way of constructing Katherine in conventional terms. More interestingly, there is a thirteenth-century sermon on the theme of St Katherine by the Franciscan theologian and preacher Gilbert of Tournai (c. 1200–84).<sup>9</sup> When set in the context of other known works by Gilbert, this sermon can be shown to reflect contemporary concerns about religious women and in particular beguines.<sup>10</sup>

Gilbert's starting text is an unusual one. He uses a quotation from 1 Kings [1 Samuel] 25: *Erat Abigail mulier prudentissima*.<sup>11</sup> This is the only time, of which I am aware, that Gilbert uses this text, and so far I have only found two other instances of its use. One is in a sermon, also on St Katherine, by Dionysius Cartusianus (1402–71).<sup>12</sup> The fact that this text is used twice in this way implies that both sermon-writers thought that there was a useful comparison to be made between the biblical heroine Abigail and St Katherine. The other instance is in a sermon attributed to the leading Franciscan, Bonaventure (1221–74).<sup>13</sup> This sermon is a general one for virgin saints. I have not been able to examine it, but given Gilbert's known propensity for drawing on the sermons of others

<sup>9</sup> Vatican City, BAV, MS Vat Lat 11444, fols 10<sup>b</sup>–12<sup>r</sup>, dating from the thirteenth century.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert studied at Paris University, where he taught for some years before joining the Franciscans shortly before 1240. He was a prolific writer and his works include many sermons; Schneyer lists 457 by him, although only two are on the theme of St Katherine. Gilbert was well connected and was commissioned by Pope Alexander IV (1254–61) to produce two collections of his sermons, and by Louis IX (1226–70) to write a manual on good government. For a summary of Gilbert's life and works, see *DSP*, s.n. 'Guibert de Tournai'. See also D. L. D'Avray, *The Preaching of the Friars: Sermons Diffused from Paris before 1300* (Oxford, 1985), 120–4, 144–6. For a list of Gilbert's sermons, see Schneyer, *Repertorium*, 2: 282–318.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Kgs 25: 3 [1 Sam. 25: 3]: 'and the name of his wife was Abigail. And she was a prudent and very comely woman.'

<sup>12</sup> *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters für die Zeit von 1350–1500* [CD-ROM] from the unpublished papers of J. B. Schneyer, ed. L. Hödl and W. Knoch (Münster, 2001) [This is a continuation of Schneyer's *Repertorium*, referred to above, which was compiled after his death from notes that he left. Unless otherwise specified, all references are to Schneyer's original *Repertorium*, not to the CD-ROM].

<sup>13</sup> Charleville, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 92. See Schneyer, *Repertorium*, 7: 224 (no. 159); *Catalogue général des manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques des départements*, 7 vols (Paris, 1849–85), 5: 589–90. Gilbert knew Bonaventure well and accompanied him to the Council of Lyons in 1274.

it may well be related to his sermon on Katherine.<sup>14</sup> Although the specific audience for Gilbert's sermon is unknown, many of his *de sanctis* sermons were composed for the Paris clergy so this may have been its intended audience. It is structured conventionally with a series of *distinctiones* supported by a large number of biblical quotations on the twin themes of *sapientia* and *prudentia*.<sup>15</sup> The date of composition is not known but is unlikely to have been earlier than the mid-thirteenth century.

Abigail was the wife of Nabal, a wealthy farmer, and is described as a 'prudent and very comely woman'. Her husband, however, is described as 'churlish and very bad and ill natured'. When David, who is hiding in the desert from Saul, asks Nabal for provisions for his men in return for having protected Nabal in the past, he refuses and so David swears to destroy him. When Abigail hears of her husband's refusal she brings provisions to David and begs him not to destroy Nabal. David is captivated by Abigail and agrees, and when her husband dies shortly afterwards David takes her as one of his wives.

The comparison of Katherine with Abigail supports the contention, made earlier, that the Church sought to contain Katherine's exceptional gifts within the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour and to use her as an exemplar of traditional female sanctity. Abigail is presented as a beautiful, intelligent woman well able to argue her cause successfully in public. However, throughout her story Abigail acts with deference and humility. She bows low before David and constantly refers to herself as a 'handmaiden' to the point that her response to his offer of marriage is: 'Behold, let thy servant be a handmaid, to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.'<sup>16</sup> Abigail also presents a model of wifely virtue as, although her first husband was a bad man, she behaves honourably and seeks to protect him.

Gilbert begins by saying that it is appropriate to adopt the description of Abigail as 'very prudent and comely' in order to praise Katherine.<sup>17</sup> The first reason for this is the similarity in

<sup>14</sup> See C. T. Maier, *Crusade, Propaganda and Ideology: Model Sermons for the Preaching of the Cross* (Cambridge, 2000), 250–63.

<sup>15</sup> See R. H. and M. A. Rouse, 'Biblical Distinctions in the Thirteenth Century', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 29 (1974), 27–37.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Kgs [1 Sam.] 25: 41.

<sup>17</sup> BAV, MS Vat Lat 11444, fol. 10<sup>rb</sup>, lines 24–26: 'convenientes possunt assumi verba

their marital situation. Abigail had two worldly marriages, one bad, one good, whilst Katherine had two spiritual ones, one bad, one good. Firstly, he says that Katherine was ‘the bride of the devil on account of the stain of Original Sin’. She then converts and becomes betrothed to Christ.<sup>18</sup> The imagery of Katherine as Christ’s bride occurs in several places in the sermon.<sup>19</sup> Although the virgin as the bride of Christ is a traditional image and Gilbert does not stray outside convention in the emphasis that he lays on it, we can see the beginnings of the story of Katherine’s mystical marriage to Christ, which was to become an important part of her Legend in subsequent centuries. Indeed, it is around the time that Gilbert was writing that the first evidence for this addition to her story appears.<sup>20</sup>

Gilbert deals with the issue of Katherine’s intellectual prowess through a series of biblical quotations concerning the concepts of *prudentia* and *sapientia*. Although the two words have slightly different shades of meaning, they are closely related.<sup>21</sup> By using both of them Gilbert manages to use the more practical nuances of meaning associated with *prudentia* to tone down the more intellectual concept of wisdom associated with *sapientia*. He also reinforces the exceptional nature of Katherine’s abilities by including texts which emphasize how both *prudentia* and *sapientia* come from God.<sup>22</sup> However, this leaves open the possibility that other women might claim to have similar gifts from God and does not address the controversial issue of women preaching. Gilbert deals with these matters indirectly by citing several biblical texts praising wise

proposita ad commendationem beate virginis Katarine’.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., lines 32–34: ‘Sic beata Katerine primus fuit sponsa diaboli propter macule originalis infectionem et postea sponsa Christi’.

<sup>19</sup> e.g. *ibid.*, fol. 10<sup>vb</sup>, lines 11–12: ‘electa mea sponsa, mea spetiosa’.

<sup>20</sup> The earliest surviving reference to Katherine’s mystical marriage is in an Old French poem dated to 1251 (Paris, BN, MS Arsenal 3645). It is not mentioned in the influential *The Golden Legend*, written c. 1260. See S. Nevanlinna and I. Taavitsainen, *St Katherine of Alexandria: The Late Middle English Prose Legend in Southwell Minster MS 7* (Cambridge, 1993), 22–3; K. J. Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2000), 107–10; Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, ed. and trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ, 1993), 2: 334–41.

<sup>21</sup> See C. T. Lewis and C. Short, eds, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1996), *s.v.* *sapiens*, where there is a cross-reference to *prudens*.

<sup>22</sup> e.g. BAV, Ms Vat Lat 11444, fol. 11<sup>ra</sup>, lines 16–17: ‘Proverbs 2 Dominus dat sapientiam et ex ore eius scientia et prudentia’ (‘the Lord giveth wisdom and out of his mouth cometh prudence and knowledge’).

men who keep their own counsel.<sup>23</sup> The implication is that even if one has intellectual abilities they are better kept private.

The issue of Katherine's intellectual abilities continued to be a theme in sermons. There is a paper by D'Avray that picks up on this theme of female scholarship and examines a sample of sermons about Katherine to elucidate how it is handled. He concludes that sermons popularized the concept of the woman intellectual as an aspect of female sanctity in Germany during the later Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup> Even so, it is worth noting that in two of the four sermons D'Avray cites emphasis is placed on the divine source of Katherine's preaching.<sup>25</sup>

So far I have concentrated on the positive aspects of Gilbert's views on holy women. However, there was another category of religious women for whom he had little time. These were the beguines. The term 'beguine' covered a wide variety of women, some of whom formed communities under clerical control while others were more independent or even followed a solitary religious life.<sup>26</sup> They were a problem for the church authorities, who found it difficult to control some of the more radical women, and even when they submitted to church supervision their way of life caused hostility in some quarters. In particular, even when they formed settled communities, they tended to interact with the lay world to a far greater extent than enclosed nuns, which laid them open to accusations of immorality. Sometimes this interaction was

<sup>23</sup> e.g. *ibid.*, fol 11<sup>va</sup>, lines 19–21: '(Ecclesiasticus 19: 28 [20: 1]) est tacens et ipse est prudens. Amos 5 prudens in tempore illo tacebit etc' ('there is one that holdeth his peace and he is wise. Amos 5 the prudent shall keep silent in that time etc').

<sup>24</sup> D. L. D'Avray, 'Katherine of Alexandria and Mass Communication in Germany: Woman as Intellectual', in N. Bériou and D. L. D'Avray, eds, *Modern Questions about Medieval Sermons: Essays on Marriage, Death, History and Sanctity* (Spoleto, 1994), 401–8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 405.

<sup>26</sup> The following works provide a good starting point for modern research on the beguine movement: H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen der Ketzerei, den Bettelorden und der religiösen Frauenbewegung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert und über die geschichtlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Mystik*, 2nd edn (Darmstadt, 1961), ET *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. S. Rowan (Notre Dame, IN, 1995); E. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture: With Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1954); R. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA, 1972); W. Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries 1200–1565* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001); T. S. Miller, 'What's in a Name? Clerical Representations of Paris Beguines (1200–1328)', *JMedH* 33 (2007), 60–86.

due to the economic necessity of earning a living, and sometimes they took on more pastoral or even preaching roles.

Gilbert’s views on beguines were forcibly expressed in his work *Collectio de scandalis*, written for the Second Council of Lyons in 1274.<sup>27</sup> This council had been called by Pope Gregory X with the objective of reinvigorating the Crusade movement. Underlying Gregory’s desire to promote the Crusade to the Holy Land was his view that, for the Crusade to be successful, reform of Church and society was needed. Gilbert is known to have been a strong supporter of the Crusades and was supportive of Gregory’s views on the need for reform.<sup>28</sup> The *Collectio de scandalis* was written very much in this vein and covered a wide range of issues which Gilbert thought the Council should address and reform. It is in its closing passages that he deals with beguines.<sup>29</sup> He accuses them, amongst other things, of translating the Bible into the vernacular and of seeking to interpret the mysteries of the Scriptures which were barely accessible to those well versed in such matters.<sup>30</sup> Gilbert claims to have handled personally a Bible translated into French by beguines, which he says was generally available in Paris. He makes it clear that he strongly disapproves of such things and believes that their books should be destroyed before they lead others astray. It has been suggested by a number of scholars that Gilbert’s hostility to the beguines was, in part, due to a desire to divert attention from the Franciscans, who were themselves under attack at the Council of Lyons.<sup>31</sup> While Gilbert may have a mixture of reasons for his attack on the beguines there can be no doubt of his contempt for them. This is clear from the scathing terms in which he addresses them: he calls them ‘little women’ (*mulierculas*) living irreverently in ‘little convents’ (*conventiculas*). These women are the opposite of the ideal woman presented in his sermon on Katherine.

However, this is not how the women saw themselves. From

<sup>27</sup> J. J. I. von Döllinger, *Beiträge zur politischen, kirchlichen und cultur-Geschichte der sechs letzten Jahrhunderte*, 3 vols (Vienna, 1882), 3: 180–200.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., three sermons by Gilbert in support of crusades in Maier, *Crusade, Propaganda and Ideology*, 176–209.

<sup>29</sup> Von Döllinger, *Beiträge*, 199–200.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 199: ‘Habent interpretata scripturarum mysteria et in communi idiomate gallicata, quae tamen in sacra scriptura exercitatis vix sunt pervia’.

<sup>31</sup> J. Le Goff, ‘Le Dossier des mendicants’, in *1274: Année charnière, mutations et continuités: Lyon–Paris, 30 septembre – 5 octobre 1974* (Paris, 1977), 211–22.

their perspective they were deeply religious women who only wanted to live a truly Christian life. Although some of their behaviour might be controversial, they also conformed to some of the fundamental religious practices of the day. Of relevance here is their participation in the cult of saints. Certain saints were of more significance to beguines than others, and the lessons they drew from these saints were different from those drawn by clerics such as Gilbert. Finding evidence for what beguine women themselves thought is difficult as they have left few written records from this period; however, it is possible to approach them indirectly and infer something of their views.

The general devotion to Katherine can be seen from the number of beguinages dedicated to the saint. In his study of beguinages in the Low Countries, Simons has found seventy-eight whose patron saint can be identified.<sup>32</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Virgin Mary was the most popular with twenty-one dedications, but she is closely followed by Katherine of Alexandria with fifteen, whilst Elizabeth of Hungary has thirteen. Many beguines had been married before turning to the religious life, and Elizabeth, a married woman with three children who had followed a harsh penitential life in her widowhood, might well appeal to such women. Katherine's appeal, however, was of a different order and was related to her distinctive attributes of scholarship and preaching.

There is considerable evidence to show that beguines were interested in scholarship and education. We have already heard from Gilbert of Tournai that the Paris beguines had translated the Bible into the vernacular and discussed and debated religious matters. While it is not clear exactly who had done the translation, it is clear that at least some beguines must have been able to read it and that there was a significant interest in theological matters. It is also the case that many beguines earned a living as teachers, and some beguinages had schools attached to them as early as the thirteenth century.<sup>33</sup> Direct evidence of preaching by beguines is harder to come by, but, for example, there is evidence that Agnes of Oinches, the Mistress of the Paris beguinage, preached to her fellow beguines.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Simons, *Cities of Ladies*, 87–8.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 80–5.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, 'What's in a Name?', 79–80.



There is also artistic evidence of beguine devotion to Katherine. In a study of thirteenth-century psalters and books of hours from the diocese of Liège, Oliver has identified several psalters as being produced for use by beguine women.<sup>35</sup> Multiple images of Katherine are to be found in these psalters. Oliver contrasts this with the fact that images of Katherine are rarely found in other Flemish psalters produced for lay patrons, which highlights the importance of the saint for beguines.<sup>36</sup> Oliver has made a detailed study of one of the psalters which she has dated to 1265–75.<sup>37</sup> This psalter was broken up and various leaves scattered but Oliver has managed to reconstruct much of it. Amongst the material which remains are five scenes from the life of St Katherine.<sup>38</sup> One of the scenes depicts Katherine studying as a child. This is rare for the thirteenth century, when stories of Katherine’s childhood were only just starting to appear, and its inclusion hints at the importance placed on education by the owner of the psalter.<sup>39</sup>

This paper has tried to show how differing responses to the cult of St Katherine can be related to conflicting views of female sanctity and acceptable female behaviour. To the beguines she was a woman who personified their aspirations to live a religious life while remaining active participants in the world. Her emblematic qualities as a teacher and preacher made her a role model for their own activities in these fields. In contrast the established Church sought to present Katherine in more conventional terms. Sermons were an important channel for promulgating this view of the saint. This highlights the importance of the study of sermons

<sup>35</sup> J. H. Oliver, *Gothic Manuscript Illumination in the Diocese of Liège (c. 1250 – c. 1330)*, 2 vols (Leuven, 1988) 1: 112–14. The Psalters cited by Oliver are: Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, MS 37 (ibid. 2: 239–41); Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MSS IV–36 (ibid. 244–6), IV–1066 (ibid. 248–50); Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 288 (ibid. 250–2); Liège, Bibliothèque de l’Université, MS 431 (ibid. 259–62); New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 440 (ibid. 280–3); Oxford, Bodl., Douce MSS d. 19, fols 10–39; 381, fols 63–5; Philadelphia, Free Library, Lewis European MSS 3:1–28 and 8:1–4 (ibid. 285–6); Paris, BN, lat. MS 1077 (ibid. 287–9).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 1: 114.

<sup>37</sup> J. H. Oliver, ‘Medieval Alphabet Soup: Reconstruction of a Mosan Psalter–Hours in Philadelphia and Oxford and the Cult of St Catherine’, *Gesta* 24 (1985), 129–40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>39</sup> Beguine devotion to Katherine can be shown to have continued into later centuries. See, e.g., certain fifteenth-century wills in A. de la Grange, ‘Choix de testaments tournaisiens antérieurs au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle’, *Annales de la Société historique et archéologique de Tournai*, ns 2 (1897), 1–365, at 141 (no. 464), 220 (no. 775), 227 (no. 798), 265 (no. 934), where various bequests are made to the saint.

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in understanding the way in which the lives of the saints were interpreted (and reinterpreted) within a specific historical context. The example of the sermon on St Katherine by Gilbert of Tournai exemplifies this process. In it we see how the judicious use of biblical quotations emphasizes Katherine's humility and obedience to her celestial spouse, Christ, whilst her intellectual abilities and public speaking are portrayed as heavenly gifts to her alone rather than as something to be copied by other women.

The tension between these two views of female sanctity mirrors the social tensions between the Church and beguine women. More work on the reception of Katherine's cult and in particular sermons on the saint would almost certainly illuminate further the range of ideas on female sanctity and spirituality that existed in the thirteenth century, and how these changed over subsequent centuries.

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