A STUDY IN ICONOGRAPHY: ST. CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA

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The relationship between religion and art has for centuries been a close one. Indeed, the very purpose of European art for most of its history was to serve religion. Yet the nature of that relationship is a complex one and gives rise to certain fundamental questions: What is the connection between visual and textual traditions? What transformations occur in images produced in different times and places, and why do they occur? How do these changes in visual imagery affect the concepts transmitted by the images?

These questions will be considered in relation to the iconography of St. Catherine of Alexandria, for centuries an immensely popular figure of devotion. Although her story supposedly occurred during the 4th century, no written record has been found preceding the 9th century.[1] Her story was popularised through its inclusion in the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, a compendium of the lives of the saints that appeared in the 1260s and was translated into many languages.[2]

Catherine's cult spread widely during the Middle Ages, especially between the 13th and 15th centuries.[3] She was adopted as patron saint by many groups, because of the various aspects of her story. She is the patron of young maidens, scholars, and philosophers as well as many professions relating to wheels: millers, wheelwrights, potters, and knife-grinders among them.[4]

In 1969, the Catholic Church removed Catherine from its Calendar of Saints along with a number of other popular saints, as no historical evidence could be found that she actually existed.[5] It has been suggested that her story may have been inspired by that of Hypatia, the famous 4th century woman scientist, whose martyrdom in Alexandria by fanatical Christians parallels in reverse Catherine's story.[6]

Like all saints, St. Catherine frequently appeared in art outside of a narrative context, either on her own or in conjunction with other holy figures. In such cases, she is easily identified by her attributes. As the daughter of a king, she typically wears a crown. She often holds a book, as evidence of her learning, and sometimes a sword, alluding to her martyrdom. The terrible spiked wheel with which she was threatened is usually shown. More rarely she is presented trampling a man at her feet; this is Maxentius, over whom she is victorious. Sometimes palm leaves,

symbol of martyrdom, are present. Her most common female companions are Barbara, Mary Magdalen, Ursula or Catherine of Siena.[7] These images of Catherine by the Master of Catherine of Cleves and Martin Schongauer, both from the 15th century, are quite typical of the type.

The narrative scenes from Catherine's life fall into two groups: those depicting her conversion to Christianity, including her mystic marriage; and those presenting her dispute with the Emperor Maxentius, resulting in her martyrdom.

Although the conversion was obviously the earlier event in Catherine's life, it was her dispute and martyrdom which appeared first in written records, in the *Golden Legend* of the 1260s. The story of St. Catherine's conversion and mystic marriage is more problematic as to dating, but the earliest recorded version seems to date from c.1337.[8] I will therefore first briefly present those episodes of Catherine's life which were told in the *Golden Legend* and depicted by artists. Most of these scenes had a fairly standard iconography which may be seen in the paintings executed by the Limbourg Brothers in a 15th century Book of Hours for the Duke of Berry. This is not only one of the most complete cycles existing of the St. Catherine legend, but is closely based on the *Golden Legend*, with the relevant text appearing below each scene.

After introducing Catherine as the daughter of a King, beautiful, gracious, and 'instructed in all the liberal arts,'[9] the *Golden Legend* focuses on her confrontation with Maxentius. Learning that the Emperor was forcing Christians to sacrifice to idols, Catherine goes to see him to argue against this practise.

Maxentius, being unable to defeat Catherine by argument, sends for 50 philosophers from all parts of his land. Initially scornful, they find themselves so overcome by her reasoning that they are converted to the teachings of Christ. When the Emperor hears of this, he orders them to be burned alive.

The *Golden Legend* then recounts Maxentius' fury at this turn of events. He not only wants her to renounce her faith, but to marry him. She refuses, informing him of her relationship with Christ: 'I have given myself as a spouse to Christ. He is my glory, He is my love, He is my sweetness and my delight; and not flatteries nor torments shall win me from His love!'[10] Maxentius' response is to order her to be stripped and beaten and thrown into prison.

While in prison, Catherine is tended by angels and visited by Christ. Unbeknownst to the Emperor, his wife visits Catherine and is converted by

her. Also converted are Porphyrius, the captain of the soldiers, and all 200 of his men. The Empress and all the soldiers are then beheaded by the Emperor.

Maxentius then decides to torture Catherine with a diabolical device -- four wheels, studded with saws and nails with the wheels revolving in opposite directions so as to cut Catherine to pieces. But an angel of the Lord strikes the wheel, breaking it apart with such violence that four thousand bystanders are killed.

When his plan to kill Catherine with the wheel fails, Maxentius orders her beheaded. At the final moment, Christ addresses her from Heaven, calling her 'My beloved, My spouse.'[11] After her death, her body is carried to Mount Sinai by angels. The Limbourgs' version includes a detailed rendering of Mt. Sinai, complete with monastery and monk.

Thus ends Jacobus de Voragine's version of St. Catherine's story. It is noteworthy that one of the most famous episodes of her legend, the mystic marriage, is not mentioned at all in his book. The only allusions to it are the references to Christ as Catherine's spouse, and to Catherine as Christ's beloved.

To find the source of the marriage story one must look elsewhere. Its origin is disputed. While Reau declares that it emerged in the 15th century,[12] examples in art exist that indicate earlier knowledge of the tale. Hall, Meiss and Warner all cite a version known in 1337 as the first written record.[13]

The legend tells of Catherine being taken by her mother to a hermit who speaks to her of Christ, her future spouse, while showing her a picture of the Virgin and Child.[14] This example from a 15th century Book of Hours by the Master of Mary of Burgundy shows the episode.

Catherine then dreams that Mary and Christ appear before her; however, Christ at first shows her only his back. The next night, after Catherine studies with the hermit, the Virgin and Child appear again, and this time Christ faces her. Announcing his pleasure with her progress, he is ready to accept her as his spouse. Mary then takes Catherine's right hand and Christ places a ring on her finger. Afterwards she is baptised by the hermit.[15] This 14th century Italian painting shows the sleeping Catherine receiving the ring.

These detailed aspects of the story are rather rare in art, however. Over time , the ceremony of the presentation of the ring came to be emphasised in artistic representations of the subject. Known as the Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine, this scene is the most frequently presented aspect of her life.[16]

The concept of a mystic marriage with Christ is an old one. The Song of Solomon, for example, was interpreted by early theologians as an allegory of the love of God, with Christ as the Bridegroom and his beloved as the Church, each Christian soul, or the Virgin Mary.[17] Numerous bridal references occur in early Church writings involving Christ and consecrated virgins.[18]

From the 12th century a new emphasis was placed on the sacrament of marriage in both theology and canon law, coinciding with the growth of marriage as a spiritual metaphor.[19] Bridal imagery of this sort occurs frequently in women's writing during the 13th and 14th centuries.[20] Other female saints who experienced visionary marriages similar to Catherine's include St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, and St. Veronica Giuliani.[21]

The familiar features of Catherine's mystic marriage may be observed in numerous versions of the subject from the 14th century onwards. Mary is typically shown holding the infant Christ in her lap, who leans forward to place a ring on Catherine's finger. She is sometimes richly dressed, as befits a princess. While sometimes the three figures are alone, in other versions they are accompanied by groups of female saints, as in this painting by Hans Memling. In other representations, Anne, Joseph or the young John the Baptist are present.

Certain variations, however, occur among images beyond the question of the number and identity of the figures. One such variable is the role of Mary in such images. While in a painting such as Memling's, she is quite passive, neither looking at Catherine nor assisting Christ in the ceremony, in many other versions, she is far more active. Correggio's painting of the early 16th century shows just the three figures in a very intimate grouping. Christ looks up at his mother as if for assistance, while it is Mary who not only draws Catherine's hand closer, but actually assists Christ to place the ring.

Ribera's painting of c.1648 does not actually depict the ring ceremony at all; rather, the emphasis is on Catherine's intense devotion to Christ, whose hand she presses to her face. St. Anne and Joseph watch from the sides.

The common expectation of visual images of this subject is that Catherine receives the ring from the infant Christ, as has been the case in the examples just shown. Indeed, some iconographers distinguish this scene from the mystic marriage of St. Catherine of Siena by virtue of Christ's appearance as an infant rather than an adult.[22] It is surprising, therefore, to

learn that a group of early 14th century paintings depict Catherine of Alexandria's mystic marriage to an adult Christ.

These images appeared in Tuscany between c.1345 and 1375. Giovanni del Biondo, for example, presents the Virgin standing between the two participants, drawing Catherine's hand towards Christ. Catherine is clearly identified by the wheel at her side. A second example by Barna da Siena omits Mary altogether from the ceremony. She appears instead below with the infant Christ and St. Anne.

Millard Meiss has identified a late 14th century text which describes Catherine's bridegroom as the adult Christ.[23] The author was a Franciscan friar who had spent time in Assisi, where he certainly would have seen the painting by Giotto's workshop of the new subject of St. Francis marrying Poverty. Meiss suggests that this very similar arrangement of an adult marriage may have influenced the friar in writing his description of Catherine's marriage. The mystic marriage of the 14th century St. Catherine of Siena, whose imagery normally involves the adult Christ, may also have influenced depictions of the Alexandrian Catherine.[24] The exact dating of the Franciscan's text and these paintings is problematic, so the actual order of influence may never be fully known. But they do raise in an intriguing way the issue of whether image follows text or vice versa.

In presenting this overview of the iconography of St. Catherine of Alexandria, I have only been able to include a fraction of the images which exist for each episode of her story. A more detailed study of the variations in imagery and the complications posed by the relationships between text and image is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I would now like to consider another feature of St. Catherine's iconography: the changing popularity of the various episodes of her legend.

An examination of more than 150 images from the 13th through the 17th centuries from a range of countries reveals an interesting pattern. Before the 16th century, a wide variety of scenes were depicted, with four scenes being most often shown: the dispute with the philosophers, the ordeal with the wheel, the beheading, and the mystic marriage. Examples from the 16th and 17th centuries, however, clearly concentrate on the mystic marriage. A small number show the beheading, while the other scenes recounted in the *Golden Legend* are rarely to be found.

I would like to propose several explanations for this phenomenon, all relating to the Catholic Reformation of the mid-16th century. Among the many issues confronting the Church at that time, those dealing with the

function and nature of religious art and the reliability of source material for religious images are relevant here.

The matter of religious art was considered by the Church during the last session of the Council of Trent. While the Protestant attitude towards religious art varied from tolerance to outright condemnation, the Catholic position was clearly positive. The decree issued as a result of the 25th session of the Council reaffirmed the value of religious images. It was through images that Christ, the Virgin, and the saints could be venerated and people could be taught the articles of faith. Images of saints were particularly singled out for praise, as they could provide models for imitation.[25]

Although the usefulness of religious images was proclaimed, certain warnings were sounded in the same document. Artists were especially to be on guard that their images did not contain elements of heresy, superstition, lasciviousness, or disrespect.[26]

These concepts, which were not explained in much detail by the Council, were considerably elaborated upon by various theologians in the years following. By the end of the 16th century, art produced in Catholic areas showed the influence of these views.

One aspect of Catholic doctrine which had a powerful impact was the instruction to avoid superstition and false information. This meant that theologians advised against the use of source material which was suspect. One of the prime candidates for this concern was the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine. Popular though it had certainly been, theologians branded it as full of inaccuracies. One of the most influential writers on this subject was the Flemish ecclesiastic Jean Ver Meulen (known as Molanus in Latin) who in 1570 declared that the *Golden Legend* was a 'legend of lead.'[27]

One might expect, therefore, that the *Golden Legend* would be used less frequently by artists as a source of their imagery, and this is generally what did happen. In the case of St. Catherine, the reduced dependence on Voragine's book would mean that the entire episode involving Maxentius, the dispute with the philosophers, the ordeal with the wheel, and her final martyrdom would no longer be shown. This may certainly be the reason for the decline in popularity of these images.

However, not all artists followed this dictum, and it has been observed that the *Golden Legend* did not entirely disappear as a sourcebook for artists.[28] This may not, therefore, be the sole reason to explain the shift in popularity of the various scenes of St. Catherine's life. Nor would this explain why the mystic marriage retained the interest of artists to such an extent.

Rather than the mystic marriage benefiting simply by virtue of other scenes having been eliminated, I would like to suggest a more positive reason for its surge in popularity. Scholars of this period have observed that certain aspects of sainthood became especially emphasised in the art of the late 16th and 17th centuries. One of the most dominant were images involving saints in visions and states of ecstasy, i.e., mystical experiences.[29] Catherine's mystic marriage would obviously accord with this trend.

There is finally one additional factor which may have helped to stimulate the changing iconography of St. Catherine. The reduction of images stressing her dispute with the Emperor and the increase in images of her mystic marriage may also relate to the concept of sainthood which she presents. It is instructive to compare the features of Catherine's story with those of other female saints.

In its basic essentials, St. Catherine's legend is quite similar to those of other female martyr saints: she devotes herself to the Christian faith, she renounces her sexual side in order to give her virginity to Christ, and she dies after being brutally tortured in order to preserve these ideals. Other early female martyrs such as Agnes, Agatha, and Barbara have similar stories.[30]

Yet, in one very fundamental respect, St. Catherine's story differs from those of the female saints with whom she is usually associated. Her story does not end with her defence of her virginity in the name of Christianity. She is learned, and so gifted with the skills of debate that she can defeat the most erudite philosophers of the land. She is able to persuade a great many people to convert to Christianity in the face of certain death. In these actions, she does not at all fit the common type of female sainthood.

The question of gender differences in the number and characteristics of saints has been thoroughly studied by Weinstein and Bell. First of all, they point to varying numbers of female saints during the period from 1000 to 1700. There was a great surge in the number of female saints in Europe between the 13th and 15th centuries. During these centuries, saints, whether male or female, were likely to be known for private prayer, penance, asceticism and mystical experiences.[31]

With the Catholic Reformation, however, the number of female saints dropped dramatically. Moreover, different features of sainthood evolved at that time for each gender. Women saints of the 16th and 17th centuries were far more likely to have been involved in supernatural experiences, including visions, than male saints.[32] Male saints in contrast were more likely to have been involved in missionary work, in converting people to

the faith.[33] Theirs was a more public face, compared to female saints' more private one.

Weinstein and Bell conclude that a 'masculine' type of sainthood evolved of the type described above. In contrast, they point to what they term an 'androgynous' type of sainthood to which female saints of the Catholic Reformation era belonged, but to which saints of both sexes belonged in the centuries preceding.[34]

When one considers that, in comparison with other female martyrs, St. Catherine was unusual in her learning and her powers of oratory and persuasion, she would have been seen as quite a 'masculine' saint through the eyes of the Counter Reformation period. Her mystic marriage, however, conformed to the type of experience that was prevalent among other female saints. The type of relationship which she had with Christ was one actually recommended for nuns. Might this development of gender-linked characteristics of sainthood have helped to precipitate the focusing away from those of Catherine's traits which would have appeared more 'masculine'? The St. Catherine whom we saw in images like those of Correggio and Ribera and this additional one by Correggio is devout, adoring, and utterly feminine.

The changing imagery of St. Catherine of Alexandria reminds us of the complex interplay between art and religion. For not only did religion affect art in its texts and doctrines, but the artistic images which then prevailed helped to define the saint in the minds of those who saw them. One's impression of St. Catherine is quite different depending on whether one sees her as a scholar, disputing with the philosophers or as a bride, engaging in a mystic marriage with Christ.

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