

Women in the *Katherine* Group and *Ancrene Riwe*

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## ABSTRACT

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The Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe are closely related in time and place of production, as linguistic and other scholarship attests. Because of their unique status as a substantial body of literature addressed to women circa A.D. 1200 in a specific locale (roughly Herefordshire), they provide an opportunity to study their common audience and context. In this dissertation I examine the women in these works, both those who appear as characters and those who are addressed as the audience, and find these works related in thematic interest and in rhetorical character and function. The study of women characters is essentially an attitudinal study of the authors and culture, through analysis of images of women appearing in the texts. The study of the audience to discover the social context of the works and their function within that context is essentially an historical-sociological approach.

The Early Middle English Life of St. Katherine provides an introduction to the themes of the "mihte" and "menske" of maidenhood, particularly in contrast to two of its Greek and Latin antecedents (which

are presented in translation in the appendix). "Meidenes mihte" in primarily verbal forms is demonstrated in the Life of St. Margaret, while the Life of St. Juliene uses physical vigor to dramatize maidens' power. The treatise Hali Meidenhad describes in specific terms the "menske" or immense honor of the Bride of Christ, simultaneously painting a grim picture of the status of the married gentlewoman. In Sawles Warde we see an English author adapting his Latin source, an unlikely candidate for inclusion in the Katherine group, into a work that demonstrates the themes of "meidenes mihte" and "meidenes menske." Ancrene Riwe presents these themes through exhortation, through aggressive role models (such as Judith in her beheading of Holofernes), and through contrasts between the Bride of Christ and the housewife. The original setting of Ancrene Riwe produced this treatise with its high view of women and their spiritual potential, but even in the relatively early Corpus Christi and Cleopatra manuscripts we can see a clear change in the circumstances surrounding the text; the author trusts his audience less and desires to control them more.

The overall portrait of women in the Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe is remarkable for its thoroughness and wide range of action. It includes the qualities of courage, learned intelligence, strength, physical aggressiveness, and unshakeable confidence in God. This portrait of womanhood is strikingly different from that contained in contemporary romance literature; instead, there are similarities between the female role in these saints' lives and the male role in chivalric romances.

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The Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe provide evidence of the

cultivation of a type of womanhood different from what one might expect in a patriarchal culture. It is my hypothesis that the special needs of the audience brought about the creation of this literature and gave it an important function in its social context. These works reinforced the option of holy maidenhood against the prevailing norm of marriage and emphasized the significance of the contribution religious maidenhood makes to society. With the vigor of their rhetoric and their dashing heroines, these works may well have served a recreative purpose in addition to their role as propaganda. Though we do not have enough historical information about the women of Herefordshire c. 1200 properly to place the Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe in their context, we can surmise from evidence within these works that the status pattern of women in landed families influenced the production and character of this body of literature and gave it the function of expanding women's choices in life and raising their self-esteem.

*Anne Middleton*

Professor Anne Middleton, Director

To  
iesu crist  
and  
mine leoue sustren

Aske þes cwenes, þes riche cuntasses,  
þes modie lafdis of hare liflade.  
--Hali Meidenhad

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gerard Manley Hopkins has written, "It is not only prayer that gives God glory but work. Smiting on an anvil. . . sweeping, scouring, everything gives God some glory if being in his grace you do it as your duty." During these last years it has often been hard for me to see that the process of working on this task could itself give God glory. Now that the dissertation is finished, I am painfully conscious of all those places where it is flawed and unfinished. Yet I offer it again to God, believing with Hopkins, "[God] is so great that all things give him glory if you mean they should."

I am grateful to many people who brought me to this task: Fred C. Robinson, who taught me to love Old English; Anne Middleton, who introduced me to Ancrene Riwe and the Katherine group; Robert Brentano, who shared his love for flowers, students, and things medieval; Richard Collier, who prepared me for the oral examination but was a teacher too good to receive tenure; and Peter Dale Scott, who encouraged me to write on this topic rather than a more expedient one. I am also grateful to those who brought me through to completion: John MacDonald Arthur, my husband, who has cheerfully if somewhat skeptically underwritten the cost of these years of medieval research; Janet M. Oman, who graciously typed these pages; and many others who have surrounded and sustained me. Finally, I offer thanks to the God who became incarnate, "qui te in periculis et necessitate invocantibus pia opulatione subvenire non desinis" (The Life of St. Katherine, p. 99).



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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION: THEORY, METHODOLOGY, REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

The women in the Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe form a striking picture. Those who appear as characters (Katherine, Margaret, Juliene, Judith, and others) are bold and steadfast, even physically aggressive --very different from the kind of women found in the romances that are contemporary to these religious works. The women who formed the audience for these works are equally interesting. Because of the close relationships between them and the authors of these texts, direct address occurs often, as well as countless indirect attempts to influence behavior and thinking. In a number of places (particularly in Ancrene Riwe), the women argue with the author; that is, he quotes their arguments and presents rebuttals. Thus the audience becomes tantalizingly real and accessible.

In this dissertation I examine the women in the Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe, both those who appear as characters and those who are addressed as the audience. The study of women characters is essentially an attitudinal study of the authors and of the culture through analysis of the images of women that appear in the texts. The study of the audience to discover the social context of the works and their function within that context is essentially an historical-sociological approach.

Though the women of Ancrene Riwe and the Katherine group are

striking, they have never before been the subject of study. Most scholarship has been confined to manuscript history and linguistics.<sup>1</sup> The vividly revealed audience of Ancrene Riwe has drawn some scholars (notably Hope Emily Allen) on a futile search for "the three sisters," but no one has attempted a social description of the audience, without which any names would be empty.<sup>2</sup> The women characters of the Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe have attracted even less attention than the audience over the years. Usually remarks are limited to a word or two, but Frances M. Mack in the preface to her edition of Seinte Marherete in 1934 writes several sentences about the unusual treatment of St. Margaret by the West Midland author, as compared with the character of Margaret in his sources.<sup>3</sup>

The author's purpose is specially marked in his treatment of the protagonist: to a greater extent than in his source, he emphasizes the undaunted courage with which the champion of virginity faces her foes, and her unshakeable faith in divine protection. But in proportion as these traits are painted in deeper colours, the portrait becomes less sympathetic, and a somewhat arrogant boldness of demeanor tends to obscure the gentler Christian virtues.

Mack is exactly right in her assessment of the greater strength of character of the West Midland Margaret. She then makes the natural move toward assessment of the effect of this change on the audience (thus requiring some prior consideration of the nature of the audience). But Mack's statements that "the portrait becomes less sympathetic" and that "a somewhat arrogant boldness of demeanor tends to obscure the gentler Christian virtues" are problematic. First, she does not distinguish whether she is referring to the contemporary medieval audience, to an assumed twentieth-century audience, or to her own reaction as audience.

Second, she assumes certain attitudes exist in the audience without examination or proof. In fact, a careful study of the female audience as revealed in these texts shows that these women were likely to be sympathetic to an aggressive, arrogant female saint. Contrary to the common stereotype of nuns (medieval or otherwise), these women indeed valued boldness and were not bent upon acquiring "the gentler Christian virtues."

Mack's comments are useful because they point out the need for a thorough study of both the portraits and the audiences of the Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe, in order to make an overall assessment of the function of these works in their social context. This is the task I have undertaken here. Though this dissertation was not originally conceived as feminist literary criticism, it differs from most work done on medieval literature both in subject and in method. Thus the topic "Women in the Katherine group and Ancrene Riwe" is best understood in the context of the developing fields of feminist literary criticism and of women's history. In order to provide that context, I will review the current state of scholarship in these fields, beginning with theory and methodology and moving on to examples of scholarship on the medieval period. I offer this not as a thorough review, but as a means of illuminating my own method in this dissertation.

#### Theory and Methodology

Feminist literary criticism has been a largely empirical development. As in any new endeavor, the object is first to do and discover, later to work out theory for what is being done; however, the skepticism of the

for further text, see UC Berkeley files  
(online?)