Female Spirituality in Marguerite’s Hours
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Abstract
Marguerite’s Hours, a Book of Hours originating in France c. 1318-1325, was produced by the Church of St. Omer and contains texts and prayers in Latin and French as well as illuminations by artists of the Franco-Flemish school. It also contains a large amount of marginalia, which depict an unusual number of pregnant women. My research examines the depictions of women in the margins of Marguerite’s Hours and asks the question: was the frequent portrayal of pregnant women in the margins created with female spirituality in mind? And if so, how would this be identified by the book’s medieval female owner? These questions are significant for two reasons: (1) because the purpose of marginalia generally is still unclear, and identifying the function of the marginalia in this book could lead to a greater understanding of marginalia as a whole, and (2) this research provides a deeper understanding of gender roles within medieval Christianity, specifically as pertains to the perception of women. Drawing on the research of medievalists Caroline Walker Bynum and Michael Camille, as well as my own analyses of Marguerite’s Hours, I argue that, in order to relate to its female patron, the marginal depictions of women in Marguerite’s Hours deliberately present women literally as (potential or actual) sources of food, mirroring the way Christ offers his body as food to his followers; display the female body in a state of physical change, thus likening the pregnant body to the crucified body of Christ; and downplay the notion of women as opprobrious figures.

Marguerite’s Hours, a Book of Hours produced c. 1318-1325 by the Church of St. Omer in France, is remarkable for the numerous images of pregnant women in its margins. Measuring 155 x 105 mm, consisting of 355 vellum pages, and bound in brown calf skin with leather tooling, this book of Latin and French texts and Franco-Flemish illuminations served as a devotional prayer guide for its medieval owner. But the manuscript’s repeated portrayals of pregnant women in its margins, interspersed with crowded depictions of fish wearing hats, rear ends poking out of ovens, and decapitated heads atop running legs, are not immediately identifiable as religious, let alone devotional, even though that is exactly what they are. These women in the margins are identifiable as both Marguerite, the book’s patroness, and Saint Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth, and they serve a distinctly religious function by alluding to the societal roles of medieval women (childbirth and nurture), thus applying the manuscript’s Christian texts and illuminations to specifically female life experiences. I argue that the marginal depictions of women in Marguerite’s Hours express medieval female piety by presenting woman as a potential and literal source of food, mirroring the way Christ offers his body as food to his followers; by displaying the female body in a state of physical change, thus likening the changing pregnant body to the crucified body of Christ, and by downplaying the notion of woman as an opprobrious figure.

Marginal images were frequently included in Books of Hours. Like other marginalia, the marginal ladies in Marguerite’s Hours were based on conventional image types found in illuminations; they could have been created by illuminators, scribes, or both. And, although scholars have yet to determine which of the multiple theories concerning the function of marginalia are correct, it has been established that their physical location in the margins does not mean they act outside the sacred realm or are separate from the larger functioning and meaning of the main text and illuminations. Since marginalia often includes whimsical, worldly, and sometimes even sexual or grotesque imagery, it may seem odd to us that they adorn the insides of religious texts such as bibles and Books of Hours. But in the Middle Ages, it was not at all uncommon for traditionally secular images and ideas to be used in the discussion or elucidation of religious subjects. The image of Saint Margaret on the same page as a bottom sticking out of an oven would not have necessarily have distracted the medieval reader from the prayers, passages, and other religious materials contained in the book. Nor would it sully the image of Saint Margaret herself or in any way eradicate her religious importance. The boundaries between the

1 Camille 1992: 18
2 Camille 1992: 22
3 Camille 1992: 18
4 Morgan Library Online Archive: Marguerite’s Hours, L6
religious and secular worlds at this period were fluid; worldly subjects were used to discuss religion because to the medieval mind, religion was not a separate sphere; religious ideas encompassed and permeated all aspects of life. Marginalia provided scribes and illuminators the opportunity to represent this fluidity visually; marginal images interacted both with and against the rigid structures in manuscript texts. They could variously represent subversions of socio-cultural norms, antitheses to the texts, or gentle parody of the manuscript's contents.\(^5\)

If much of the rest of the marginal imagery in Marguerite's Hours functioned as soft parody of the main text and illuminations, the depictions of Saint Margaret and the patroness, Marguerite, served a distinct purpose. They are physically and visually separated from the other marginalia through their positioning on a raised structure or branch, which grants them a compositional distance from most of the turbulent marginal mayhem — despite their existence in direct relationship to it. Usually depicted on the right side of the page, supported by leaves\(^6\) or standing alone inside a small rectangular structure topped with small towers and a lavishly detailed arch,\(^7\) the marginal ladies are given a seat of privilege and clarity amongst fantastically tangled images of animals, detached human body parts, vines, and hybrid creatures. In addition to their physical separation from the figures crowding the margins, the women are granted more negative space and are depicted in slightly larger scale than the other marginal images, as if indicating their importance to the patroness and ensuring that they are not overlooked.\(^8\) The women are seen in various poses, sometimes standing and sometimes kneeling, but they are almost always facing the illumination or text at the center of the page. They typically have their hands clasped in prayer or hold a book (presumably a Bible) in their outstretched arms, as if ignoring their tical surroundings in order to focus solely on the rigid structure provided in the Biblical text and imagery. In some cases, their gaze might also act as the aesthetic factor tying the marginalia and the main texts and illuminations together.

A key and consistent aspect of the marginal women in Marguerite's Hours is their portrayal in various states of pregnancy.\(^9\) The portrayals are not chronological; rather, they might depict a still slender woman on one page and a hugely pregnant one on the next. These dramatic shifts in appearance would likely catch the patroness' eye and bring to mind thoughts of her own potential and past pregnancies, as well as her societal and religious roles and the religious connotations of these pregnancies. In medieval Christianity, men and women were thought to have been given distinctly different roles by God; the man was seen as possessor of God's knowledge and was created to lead, and woman, possessor of his flesh, was made to follow.\(^10\) Because of these distinctions, it was not at all uncommon during the Middle Ages for religious imagery to be geared specifically toward men or women. And because women were possessors of God's flesh, medieval female piety thus utilized sources that were familiar to women or that pertained to what was understood as the woman's sphere — such as food, childbirth, and nurture — in order to enforce the connection between Christ, God's flesh and the provider for all of humanity, and medieval woman, who used her literal flesh to provide for her children.\(^11\)

The depictions of the pregnant patroness in Marguerite's Hours also cater specifically to female spirituality in their presentation of women as both potential and literal sources of food. The deliberate and heavily emphasized marginal depictions of Saint Margaret and of the pregnant patroness, Marguerite, suggest that the latter will be or already is offering her body as food to another human being. Medieval women often viewed metaphorically the physical changes the pregnant body undergoes; the changing body was compared to the changes Christ's body underwent during crucifixion, and breastfeeding was linked to the concept of Christ's body nourishing his followers.\(^12\) In her book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to the Medieval Women*, Caroline Walker Bynum emphasizes the role of women as symbols of literal food in women's spirituality, noting that food imagery was much more significant to female religious

\(^{5}\) Camille 1992:21
\(^{6}\) Morgan Library Online Archive: Maguerite's Hours, L1
\(^{7}\) Morgan Library Online Archive: Maguerite's Hours, L138
\(^{8}\) Morgan Library Online Archive: Mauguerite's Hours, L200, L126
\(^{9}\) Bell 1982:743. Medieval women played active roles in society, were oftentimes literate, and sometimes acted as patrons in their own right.
\(^{10}\) Bynum 1987:261

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\(^{*}\) Camille 1992:21
\(^{*}\) Morgan Library Online Archive: Maguerite's Hours, L1
\(^{*}\) Morgan Library Online Archive: Mauguerite's Hours, L138
\(^{*}\) The Morgan Library http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/128495. Occasionally, both St. Margaret and Marguerite are depicted together among the throng of whimsical illustrations with one woman on either side of the main text. On most pages, only one woman is shown. Since the women's dress changes style and color throughout the pages of the book, and since both are shown in various stages of pregnancy, scholars have not differentiated one woman from the other. They have only made inferences about the identities being presented.
practices than male. For a period after childbirth, women produce breastmilk, a human's first source of nourishment; because of this, women were seen as the ultimate providers. By selflessly providing nourishment from their bodies, women acted in the manner of Christ, who offered his body to his disciples as food, saying “take, eat; this is my body.”13 While this imagery and thought process would not resonate much with medieval men, it served to link the female owner of the manuscript to the Lord.

The marginal depictions of pregnant women in Marguerite's Hours also speak directly to female piety through the display of the female body in a state of physical change. The marginal presentations of the patroness and Saint Margaret in various states of pregnancy from one page to the next emphasize the Christ-like transformation the female body undergoes and draws associations, again, to breastmilk and other bodily fluids. During the crucifixion, Christ's body is described as undergoing dramatic physical changes.14 In Isaiah 53:5, Christ is discussed as “pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon him, and by His scourging we are healed [my italics].”15 The gruesome wounds inflicted upon Christ were necessary, because his body had to undergo painful changes in order to purge Christians of their sins and thus grant them eternal life. Like any body, the body of Christ, after he had been killed, continued to bleed and secreted waste. This gruesome and human death had to take place in order to save humanity and grant life and was therefore perceived as an essential part of the miracle of Christ's resurrection. Since the female body exudes breastmilk, menstrual blood, and afterbirth fluids, it was “seen as powerful in its holy or miraculous exuding,” and was also in this way related with the literal becoming of the crucified body.16 Through the visual indication of woman as food and the changing body of crucified Christ, the marginalia in Marguerite's Hours serve to relate more personally the manuscript's contents to its patroness and to her fulfillment of both the societal and religious roles of women.

The final indicator that the marginalia in Marguerite's hours were created to promote and perhaps also to reflect proper female piety is the lack of opprobrious portrayals of women. Because medieval men and women had different religious roles (men were seen as being God's knowledge or spirit and women were his flesh), women were depicted differently in religious imagery depending on whether it was geared toward male or female audiences. In an attempt to discourage sinful actions and retain man's spiritual purity, specifically male piety often used images of women in ways that emphasized feminine weakness, temptation, and corruption, which is why medieval imagery frequently demonized women or depicted them with “moral ambivalence.”17 Derogatory and even disfigured depictions of women were deemed necessary, because the accurately portrayed female face was seen as an object of sin and temptation.18 Medieval men were also much more apt to view male and female piety dichotomously,19 and images designed for a male audience might frequently “criticize particular women and...differentiate sharply between...male and female characteristics.”20 Marginal images are known to be exaggerated, absurd, and full of commentary. The absence of negative portrayals of women in Marguerite's Hours alone is evidence of the manuscript's specific position in the realm of female piety.

Medieval women, while they sometimes internalized notions of feminine sinfulness and described themselves as “weak” and “sinful,” also had positive models and conceptualizations of feminine functioning and behavior. The facial and bodily representations of the women in the marginalia of Marguerite's Hours do not indicate that women are lesser, shameful, or evil. Nor are they grotesque or compared (disadvantageously) to men. They instead, through indications of pregnancy, use the notion of woman as flesh to promote women as positive and productive members of society and link them to Christ. Marguerite and Saint Margaret are portrayed not only without opprobrium but in a positive light, in a manner referencing the actual Marguerite's likely societal roles. Amongst the marginal portrayals of fantastical humans, beasts, and hybrids, the numerous pregnant women in Marguerite's Hours serve as a compositional and ideological link between the seemingly worldly marginalia and the rigidly religious texts and illuminations. And, although the concrete meaning of

13 Bynum 1987:279
14 Matthew 26:26 KJV
15 Morgan Library Online Archive: Marguerite's Hours, L200, L126
16 Isaiah 53:5 KJV
17 Sauerländer 2006:6
18 Bynum 1987:263
19 Bynum 1987:264
20 Bynum 1987:264
marginalia as a whole remains unknown, it is clear that these specific marginal depictions of the female body as food and in a state of physical change emphasize the medieval understanding of pregnancy as a time when women were physically in tune with the Lord, thus appealing to and promoting female piety.

**References**


