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A Garden Enclosed, A Fountain Sealed Up:
Paradoxical and Generative Metaphors
of Enclosure in Medieval Female Anchoritism

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Description: In addition to monastic and eremitic vocations, medieval women embraced with great fervor the anchoritic life. This unique method of separation produced a multiplicity of metaphorical language to describe the experience of the anchoress and her enclosure. This essay examines a cross section of that metaphorical language, focusing on those which are principally generative and paradoxical.

This paper may be duplicated.

Introduction

Medieval religious life is nothing if not metaphorical. While consecrated persons living a religious life certainly experienced the sometimes harsh realities of lived monastic life—imposed penance, regular bloodletting, strict obedience—they also experienced a sort of highly metaphorical secondary life steeped in rich and sometimes fantastical imagery.

While this language of symbolism was true for consecrated life on whole, it was particularly true for a truly unique subset of religious consecration: the anchoritic life.¹ The anchoritic life was a particular manifestation of the secluded or eremitical life, available both to women (anchoresses) and men (anchorites), although embraced more significantly by women throughout the middle ages.²³ While a standard hermit was free to roam about for whatever reason (as in the life of St Peter the Hermit, for example, who was a key player in the First Crusade), those living the anchoritic life were bound by solemn consecration to their cells.⁴ While both practitioners of eremitical and

¹ From the Greek, “one who has retired from the word”

² Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards. “Introduction: Intersections of Time and Space in Gender and Enclosure.” In *Anchorites, Wombs, and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005. 13.

³ While anchoritism was adopted by both women and men, it is clear that women embraced it at an overwhelmingly higher rate. It follows that the bulk of the anchoritic literature was directed to the lives of enclosed women. Given that very clear majority, I will be focusing primarily on women in anchoritism. An exploration of the experience of anchorites in a female-dominated lifestyle would be fascinating, however it seems to fall outside the scope of this essay.

⁴ Anna Comnena, *The Alexiad*, trans. E. R. A. Sewter and Peter Frankopan. London: Penguin, 2009.

anchoritic life left the conventions of society in a variety of ways in order to undertake an ascetic or contemplative life, it is only the anchoress whose seclusion brings with it an element of stability. For, indeed, the religious seclusion of the anchoress was to be lived in one—and only one—location: her anchorhold, a small cell typically attached to a parish or monastic church.

Given the uniqueness of their calling, it follows, that the language utilized to describe the anchoress and her life—both by anchoresses and those writing to and about them—would be distinctive in its scope and its intent. The language used to describe the anchoress' enclosure tended toward both generative and paradoxical uses. To the generative use, language employed speaks flexibly of life and death, birth and re-birth, often grounding itself in the life and death of Christ. To the paradoxical use, on the other hand, opposites juxtapose against one another in order to create or signify deeper spiritual significance. The cold and dark tomb, for example, becomes the source of new life; the woman locked forever in her cell becomes a bird whose wings enable her to soar.

Before delving too deeply into the metaphorical language of the anchoress, it seems right to explore briefly the context of medieval female anchoritism and offer a few of many motivations for taking on this perpetual vocation.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a large number of unmarried women living in European towns and cities.⁵ The religious life available to women was largely diverse and unorganized. These religious women, who came to religion for any number of reasons, lived out their devotion without a recognized (that is, institutional) monastic vow or external magisterial oversight.⁶ Of great concern to ecclesiastics was “the nagging fear of heresy and suspicion of the religious life outside of institution oversight and regulation, of *religio* without *regulae*.”⁷ To that end, Pope Innocent (1198-1216) made every effort to bring about a uniformity of religious life for women with the creation of the *universal cenobium monilium*, “one great monastery for women...that would unite all religious women – nuns and penitents alike – in one convent under one rule.”⁸

As Innocent enacted his vision of female uniformity, backed up in a serious way by the canons Fourth Lateran Council of 1216, the religious houses of the established and reformed Orders (namely the Benedictines and Cistercians) sought to take less responsibility for women, even those who sought to enter the particular Order.⁹ To that end the Cistercian Order passed legislation during the General Chapters of 1219, 1220, 1225, and 1228 that limited and eventually excluded nuns from entering the Order and

⁵ Patricia J. F. Rosof. “The anchoress in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries.” In *Medieval Religious Women: Peaceweavers*, edited by Lillian Thomas Shank and John A. Nichols. Vol 2. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1987. 124

⁶ Anne Elisabeth Lester. *Creating Cistercian Nuns: The Women’s Religious Movement and Its Reform in Thirteenth-Century Champagne*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. 88.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88-89

⁹ *Ibid.*, 125

placing limitations on those already claustrated.¹⁰ While women were allowed to emulate ("*aemulari*¹¹") the life and charism of the Cistercians, they were not permitted official affiliation with the General Chapter.¹² With the same hand, monks and *conversi*¹³ were expressly forbidden from interacting with these women or even exercising spiritual care for the nuns already in the Order ("*cura monialium*").^{14 15}

For the "sincerely religiously motivated" woman, therefore, the secluded life of a consecrated recluse seemed to be the best option for a professed religious life.¹⁶ Between the eighth and sixteenth century in England, for example, there appears to be an over two-to-one ratio between anchoresses and anchorites respectively.¹⁷ The anchoritic life attracted women both young and old, idealistic and jaded, poor and wealthy.¹⁸ Given that diversity in background, it is quite difficult to speak definitively about the vocational mooring of anchoresses. It is, however, possible to speak generally of anchoresses as "strong, highly motivated women" who sought out their anchorholds

¹⁰ Lester, 94.

¹¹ From the Latin, "To emulate, to rival, to vie for, or to strive to excel in."

¹² Lester, 95.

¹³ *Conversi* is the plural for *Conversus*, the Latin term used for lay brothers in a medieval monastic house. They were generally permitted to take vows, but were illiterate and were not ordained to priesthood.

¹⁴ From the Latin, "the care of nuns", used to denote the spiritual and sometimes temporal responsibility that monastic communities of men exercised over monastic communities of women.

¹⁵ Lester, 95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Rosof, 125.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

“in spite of great pressure to follow other directions, the strongest being their parents’ pressure to marry.”¹⁹

Anchoress as Bird

“True anchoresses are called birds,” writes the anonymous author of the *Ancrene Wisse*, a 13th century guide to the anchoritic life, “because they leave the earth – that is, the love of all wordly things – and, through yearning in their hearts for heavenly things, fly upward toward heaven.”²⁰ The bird imagery employed by the *Ancrene Wisse* harkens to both the paradoxical and generative themes, particularly when thinking of the bird both in flight and at rest.

To the theme of paradoxical theme of stability, anchoresses become metaphorically “birds in their nests...the night-bird under the eaves...and the sparrow alone on the roof”²¹ One does not commonly connote a bird – in possession of the faculty to fly and, indeed, flying hither and yon – to be a place marker for stability of location. Although compared to a bird, the anchoress does not possess the freedom of the bird, who may fly whenever and wherever it wants. The image becomes further

¹⁹ Rosof, 127.

²⁰ “*Ancrene Wisse*.” In *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, edited by Nicholas Watson and Anne Savage. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991. 97.

²¹ Cate Gunn. “*Ancrene Wisse* and Lay Piety.” In *Anchorites, Wombs, and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005. 164.

paradoxical when considering prayer as the anchoress' method of flight. The *Ancrene Wisse* indicates that the "anchoress must fly by night toward heaven with contemplation—that is, with high thoughts and holy prayers—and gather her soul-food by night."²² Although she will never again leave her anchorhold, the anchoress is able to soar to unhuman heights by virtue of her prayer. All things being kept in moderation, however, the anchoress is counseled in the *Ancrene Wisse*, that no matter how "high in spirit [the anchoress] may soar, she must return to the 'eorðe of hire bodi' (earth of her body)."²³ Contemplative flight is good while it lasts, but the anchoress would not do well to dwell with her head or her heart in the clouds, as it were.

In addition to taking on the figurative likeness of the common songbird, the anchoress also assumes a particular role as pelican. The author of the *Ancrene Wisse* quotes Psalm 101 in describing in the first person an anchoress: "I am become like to a pelican of the wilderness." ("*Similis factus sum pellicano solitudinis*")²⁴ While the pelican might seem a bizarre bird to describe a decidedly consecrated person, the pelican is a rich and classical symbol for the Eucharist. It was medieval belief that the pelican would pluck her own breast in order to provide food for her young. In that same way, Jesus plucks his breast to feed the Church with the Eucharist.²⁵ Herein the anchoress is

²² "*Ancrene Wisse*," 751.

²³ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁴ Gunn, 164.

²⁵ "Adoro te devote" in *The Parish Book of Chant*. Church Music Association of America, 2012. 174. Verse six of the hymn originally composed by St. Thomas Aquinas: "*Pie pellicane Jesu Domine! Me immundum*

entered herself into a Christological framework, a theme which will continue to emerge throughout our exploration.

Anchorhold as Tomb

The life of an anchoress was one of constant death. “Anchorites inhabited a liminal space,” writes Roberta Gilchrist, “between the living and the dead: to be immured in a cell represented a kind of symbolic death.”²⁶ While the consecration ceremony for a nun or canoness might have been heavy on bridal language, the ceremonial for anchoresses resembled much more the Church’s burial rites. Indeed, the rite of consecration calls for the bishop to sprinkle dirt over the anchoress and to celebrate the Mass of the Dead prior to sealing her in the anchorhold.²⁷ Since enclosure was a perpetual decision, it was assumed at the moment of consecration that the anchorhold would be the place where the anchoress met physical death, if not the place where she would herself be bodily interred.²⁸ Some anchorholds feature actual burial plots, sometimes even dug up by the anchoress herself.²⁹

munda tuo sanguine,/ Cujus una stilla saluam facere;/ Totum mundum quit ab omni scelere.” In English, “Kindly pelican, Lord Jesus, cleanse me, the unclean one, in thy blood, of which [just] one drop can save the entire world of all crime.

²⁶ Roberta Gilchrist. *Contemplation and Action: The Other Monasticism*. London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1995. 190.

²⁷ Rosof, 132.

²⁸ Rosof, 132.

²⁹ Ibid.

Comparisons were also drawn to the anchoress as Christ and the anchorhold as Christ's tomb.³⁰ This employment of tomb imagery functionally plays with the connotations of death that are so prevalent in anchoritic life. Indeed, enclosure is seen as Christological paradox in that the tomb-enclosure is the means by which the anchoress most fully experiences new life. This metaphorical newness of life becomes the actual new life that the anchoress is taking, reflecting the transition from a woman in the world to a woman locked perpetually within her enclosure. Likewise, one quickly makes the connection to a spiritual regeneration in Christ, much akin to the religious new life resulting from the Sacrament of Baptism.

Not all tomb language, however, was so generative. While some draw the comparisons between the anchorhold and Christ's tomb, others liken it to tomb-prison, where sin and vice are relegated in punishment. The *Ancrene Wisse* describes the danger of the anchoress "looking at her own white hands," language used to imply vanity, suggesting instead that her hands "should be scraping the earth up every day out of the pit they must rot in!"³¹ The language of "scraping," "pit," and "rot," especially when positioned next to an admonition against non-wounded hands and in the context of vanity communicates the author's belief that the anchorhold is as good as a regular tomb, sans religious connotation. The language of tomb – with or without religious

³⁰McAvoy, 22

³¹ "Ancrene Wisse," 91-92.

connotation—serves to further the notion of paradox. Locked away in her tomb, the anchoress experiences life and death quite simultaneously. Indeed, it is impossible for new life to come without first being buried.

Anchorhold as Womb

As with some of the tomb imagery, the anchorhold as maternal womb becomes the site of salvation. Liz McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards write:

The [anchoress], like Christ...as a child in Mary's womb served as a bridge between life and death, between Fall and redemption, between material and metaphysical, and ultimately as an agent of reparation between human and its God.³²

The notion of the womb as tomb is ancient and extends beyond Christian usage.³³ It is an interesting image because while the tomb heralds Christ's rise from the dead, the womb—particularly the Blessed Virgin Mary's womb—heralds Christ's nativity. As such, the anchoress finds herself firmly moored in both incarnation and resurrection, the two spectrums of Christ's salvific work. Yet again, the Christological framework is strengthened.

³² McAvoy, Hughes-Edwards, 22.

³³ One notable and curious instance of non-Christian usage comes from an ancient Babylonian incantation, where, after the midwife speaks a prayer/spell over the woman in labor, "[r]emoved are the locks, the doors are thrown aside." For more information, see Amar Annus. *The Overtaken Boat: Intertextuality of the Adapa Myth and Exorcist Literature*. Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2016.

The location of the anchoress within the womb cannot be anything other than paradox, for it would be otherwise impossible for a grown woman to enter again a mother's womb. Nicodemus asks Jesus himself this very question in John's Gospel: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"³⁴ Jesus' answer becomes the answer of the anchoresses: "Very truly, I tell you...What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."³⁵

The womb as site of self-contained development finds resonance within the anchorhold. As the fetus within the womb does not, indeed cannot, look beyond the womb for sustenance, neither should or must the anchoress look beyond her anchorhold.³⁶ The physical needs of the anchoress were all provided, "for the contemplative ideal meant that...the [anchoress] should have no involvement whatsoever in the secular world."³⁷ Although the material needs of the anchoresses were satisfied by external sources, it can be concluded that these sources originated from generous alms or wealthy patronage. While this spiritual investment in exchange for temporal resources is not unique to the anchoritic expression of consecrated life –

³⁴ Jn 3:4 NRSV

³⁵ Jn 3:5-6 NRSV

³⁶ Alexandra Barrat. "Context: Some Reflections on Wombs and Tombs and Inclusive Language." In *Anchorites, Wombs, and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005. 31.

³⁷ Ibid.

indeed, it seems to form a sturdy bedrock for most medieval religious economics –it exists in its extreme for anchoresses who, unlike monastics or hermits, could not leave her enclosure.³⁸

Much energy is spent in anchoritic literature on comparing the anchorhold to the Virgin Mary's womb. The author of the *Ancrene Wisse* writes, "Was not [Christ] himself a recluse in Mary's womb?" The anchoress, sealed perpetually in her anchorhold, is then to locate herself spiritually in the very womb of Mary. An anchoress's work becomes salvific, for that which is produced within the anchorhold (that is her personal contemplation, spiritual counsel, and sheer presence) is to be seen as that which was produced within Mary's womb: namely, the savior. It is here – at Christ's indwelling within the Virgin's womb – that we see a climax in the anchoress' Christological framework, for it is here that the anchoress participates in a very direct way in the salvation of the world.

Anchorhold as Wound

In continuity with the medieval devotion to the Wounded Side of Christ, the anchoress was to imagine herself located deep inside the wounds of Christ. Contemporary readers might view this particular figurative location with some disdain. Modern readers understandably connote wounds with violation and violence. The

³⁸ Barrat, 32.

medieval reader, however, would have no such disdain. For, indeed, the Wounded Side of Christ was “more frequently hymned as doorway and access, refuge and consolation, than as violation; to penetrate is to open the way.”³⁹ To locate herself, therefore, in the cleft of Christ’s wounded side was to locate herself in the refuge of all refuges. The generative and paradoxical themes continue even to this metaphorical usage. The wounded side of Christ was not a mere skin abrasion or laceration, but rather the spiritual signifier of both the Eucharist and Baptism, for the blood of Eucharist and the water of Baptism “came out of” Christ’s wounds.^{40 41} The theme there becomes generative in so far as the Sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism generate spiritual and eschatological life. It is through a wound – a refuge – that newness of life is introduced to humanity and it is through a refuge – a wound – that newness of life is introduced to the anchoress

Anchorhold as Garden

While one found anchoresses predominantly in urban places, language emerged in the literature to describe anchorholds as the “*hortus conclusus*”.^{42 43} The walls of the

³⁹ Michelle M. Sauer. “‘Pe blod þ[at] bohte’: The Wooing Group Christ as Pierced, Pricked, and Penetrated Body.” In *The Milieu and Context of the Wooing Group*. Edited by Susannah Mary Chewning. University of Wales Press, 2009. 134.

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 3.66.3.

⁴¹ Jn 19:34 New Revised Standard Version

⁴² “Enclosed garden,” a medieval form of garden which suggested high, decorative shrubbery meant to afford strict privacy.

⁴³ McQuinn, 98.

enclosed garden protected the contents of the garden from the outside world, especially from those who would seek to pluck wrongfully the fruit. Likewise, the walls of the anchorhold protected the fruit of that *hortus conclusis*—that is the anchoress and her virginal purity—from the outside world and those who would seek to pluck that fruit. Although the rationale behind the language is not generative, the language itself proves to be just that.

Regardless of the anchoress' purity – for, indeed, her perpetual virginity would have been guaranteed –garden imagery naturally evokes life. Indeed, the cyclical nature of the garden—the turn of seasons, the winter death, the spring rebirth—speaks directly to the Paschal mystery, the great death and new life narrative of the Church. In his spiritual treatise *De Institutione Inclusariorum* (“On the Formation of Anchoresses”), Aelred of Rievaulx, posits that the “joy found within Christ ‘shuld be thy garden, thyn orchard and thy disport [comfort]’.”⁴⁴ Although the anchoress will never produce fruit of her own – that is children –she participates in the verdant horticultural imagery. The flowers of contemplation, the seeds of righteousness, the buds of purity are shown to issue from a patently chaste tree, that is the anchoress.

The generative theme emerges, again less obviously than in other usages, by looking at the origins of the source: the monastic garden. Aelred, himself a Cistercian

⁴⁴ McQuinn, 98.

abbot, would have surely been familiar with the famous Plan of St. Gall, an idealized monastic blueprint. Each monastery built according to the Plan featured a variety of outdoor greenery, including “vegetable plots, vineyards, orchards, a physic garden of medicinal herbs, as well as a flower garden.”⁴⁵

In addition to the more conventional connotations of gardens—the flowers of the altar, the fruit of the table, and the herbs of the infirmary—the medieval monk, indeed Aelred himself, would likely recognize the monastic garden as cemetery.⁴⁶ The Plan of St. Gall describes the cemetery as “a garden planted with fruit and shade trees set in straight rows with the graves between them.”⁴⁷ The anchorhold as garden instantly harkens back to the themes of rebirth and resurrection. For it is the garden-cemetery where Aelred and others writing direction for anchoresses during their lives would expect to wait for the resurrection. The anchorhold as garden, as the literal burial place of the anchoress and the spiritual place where she will greet the resurrection, then follows rather naturally.

⁴⁵ Ann Ball. *Catholic Traditions in the Garden*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1998. 44.

⁴⁶ Megan Cassidy-Welch. *Monastic Spaces and their Meanings: Thirteenth Century English Cistercian Monasteries*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2001. 233.

⁴⁷ Ball, 44.

Conclusion

Consecrated life was alive and well in the medieval European Church, which meant that the devout believer had no shortage of options for living out a life of close intimacy with the Lord. The anchoress, however, stands out from among the others. For her life's calling did not resemble that of any other form of consecrated life, but rather struck a unique and differently regulated path. The seclusion afforded to the anchoress by virtue of her consecrated anchorhold distinguished her religious life from the religious lives of those who occupied priories, abbeys, and friaries all over Christendom. The anchorhold, often little more than a room hewn into the city's parish church or a forward thinking nunnery, became then the subject of any number of imaginative metaphors, all of which aimed to link the anchoress' life to the life of Christ, to whom her very life was consecrated. From among that metaphorical language, two themes emerge as unitive: the anchoress and her anchorhold as paradoxical and generative. By mooring herself perpetually into sacred enclosure, the anchoress immersed herself in a special way into the paradoxical and regenerating reality of Christian life—simultaneously living the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom she learned to keep as a sole, sweet, and constant companion.

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