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A GARDEN ENCLOSED, A FOUNTAIN SEALED UP:
PARADOXICAL AND GENERATIVE METAPHORS OF
ENCLOSURE IN MEDIEVAL FEMALE ANCHORITISM

Cody E. Maynus, Obl.S.B.

Abstract - 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.

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 consecrated life: the anchoress.² The anchoritic life was a particular manifestation of the secluded or eremitical life. While both practitioners of eremitical and 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. It follows, then, that the language utilized to describe the anchorhold—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 anchorhold—the anchoress’ cell, often located in a parish church, monastery, or nunnery—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 are played off of 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.³ Religious houses of the established and reformed Orders (namely the Benedictines and Cistercians) sought during this period to take less responsibility for women, even those who sought to enter the particular Order.⁴ 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 placing limitations on those already claustrated.⁵ While women were allowed to emulate (“*aemulari*”⁶) the life and charism of the Cistercians, they were not permitted official affiliation with the General Chapter.⁷ Likewise monks and *conversi*⁸ were expressly forbidden from interacting with these women or even exercising

spiritual care for the nuns already in the Order (“*cura monialium*”⁹).¹⁰

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.¹¹ Records indicate that anchoresses far outnumbered anchorites, particularly in towns and city centers. 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.¹² The anchoritic life attracted women both young and old, idealistic and jaded, poor and wealthy.¹³ 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 “in spite of great pressure to follow other directions, the strongest being their parents’ pressure to marry.”¹⁴

ANCHORESS AS BIRD

Utilizing a common devotional image for the contemplative life, the anchoress is often to be regarded as a bird, both in flight and at rest. The bird imagery, while not as obviously paradoxical or generative, still harkens to both themes, particularly when thinking of the bird, not as a generic songbird, but as a pelican. The author of the *Ancrene Wisse* quotes the 101st Psalm in describing in the first person an anchoress: “I am become like to a pelican of the wilderness” (“*Similis factus sum pellicano solitudinis*”¹⁵). While the pelican might seem a bizarre bird to describe a 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.¹⁶

In addition to the generative image of the pelican, anchoresses

are compared in the *Ancrene Wisse* to “birds in their nests...the night-bird under the eaves...and the sparrow alone on the roof”¹⁷ While the pelican was certainly generative, the imagery of these common birds moves more in the direction of paradox. Although these birds are mentioned in the context of their aloneness, speaking of their remote location and/or their seclusion from other birds of their kind, one does not commonly connote a bird with stability of location. Although she is compared to the bird, she does not possess the freedom of the bird, who may fly whenever and wherever it wants. The image becomes 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.”¹⁸ 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 ‘eorde of hire bodi’ (earth of her body).”¹⁹ 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.

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.”²⁰ 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, it is not unknown for the anchoress to be sprinkled with dirt and the Mass of the Dead to be celebrated prior to her being sealed

into her anchorhold.²¹ 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 death, if not the place where she would herself be bodily interred.²² Actual burial plots were featured in some anchorholds, sometimes even dug up by the anchoress herself.²³

Comparisons were also drawn to the anchoress as Christ and the anchorhold as Christ's tomb.²⁴ This employment of tomb imagery functionally plays with the connotations of death which are so prevalent in anchoritic life. Indeed, enclosure can be seen as Christological paradox in that the tomb-enclosure is the means by which the anchoress most fully experiences new life. This new life can literally be seen as the 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, it can be easily seen as a regeneration in Christ, much akin to the new life resulting from 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—popularly happiness and mirth—are relegated in punishment. The anonymous author of the *Ancrene Wisse*, a guide to the anchoritic life, describes the danger of the anchoress “looking at her own white hands,” [vanity] suggesting instead that “[t]hey should be scraping the earth up every day out of the pit they must rot in!”²⁵ 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 a tomb where resurrection is not likely to happen on the third day.

ANCHORHOLD AS WOMB

As with some of the tomb imagery, the anchorhold as 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.²⁶

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.

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?"²⁷ 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."²⁸

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.²⁹ 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."³⁰ 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, a spiritual investment in exchange for

temporal resources.³¹

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 can be seen as salvific, for what is produced within the anchorhold (her personal contemplation and spiritual counsel) is to be seen as that which was produced within Mary's womb: namely, the savior.

ANCHORHOLD AS WOUND

In continuity with the medieval devotion to the Wounded Side of Christ, the anchoress was to imagine herself inside the wounds of Christ. Contemporary readers might view this particular location with some disdain. The 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."³² 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"³³ Christ's wounds.³⁴

ANCHORHOLD AS GARDEN

While anchoresses were found predominantly in urban places, language emerged in the literature to describe anchorholds as the

“*hortus conclusus*”^{35,36} The walls of the enclosed garden protected the contents of the garden from the outside world, especially from those who would seek to wrongfully pluck the fruit. Likewise, the walls of the anchorhold protected the fruit of that *hortus conclusus*—the anchoress and her 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, 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. Aelred of Rievaulx’s redactor posits that the “joy found within Christ ‘shuld be thy garden, thyn orchard and thy disport [comfort]’.”³⁷

The generative theme is found, again less obviously than in other usages, by looking at the origins of the source: the monastic garden. Aelred, himself a Cistercian monk, 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.”³⁸

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 would likely have thought of the garden as cemetery.³⁹ The cemetery in the Plan of St. Gall is described as being “a garden planted with fruit and shade trees set in straight rows with the graves between them.”⁴⁰ 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 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, makes

perfect sense.

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 completely 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 anchoresses life to the life of Christ, to whom her 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.

Notes:

1. Kristen McQuinn. "Crepe into That Blessed Syde": Enclosure Imagery in Aelred of Rievaulx's *de Institutione Inclusarum*." 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, 98.
2. Although anchoritism was practiced by both women (anchoresses) and men (anchorites) in the medieval period, the focus of this essay is on anchoresses.
3. 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.

4. *Ibid.*, 125.

5. Anne Elisabeth Lester. *Creating Cistercian Nuns: The Women's Religious Movement and Its Reform in Thirteenth-Century Champagne*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. 94.]

6. Literally to emulate, to rival, to vie for, or to strive to excel in.

7. Lester, 95.

8. *Conversi* is the plural for *Conversus*, the 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.

9. Literally “the care of nuns”, used to denote the spiritual and sometimes temporal responsibility that monastic communities of men exercised over monastic communities of women.

10. Lester, 95.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Rosof, 125.

13. *Ibid.*, 126.

14. *Ibid.*, 127.

15. 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.

16. “*Adoro te devote*” (174) in *The Parish Book of Chant* (Church Music Association of America, 2012).

Verse six of the hymn originally composed by St. Thomas Aquinas: “*Pie pellicane Jesu Domine/ Me immundum munda tuo sanguine./ Cujus una stilla salvum 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.

17. Gunn, 164.

18. “*Ancrene Wisse*,” 751.

19. *Ibid.*, 70.

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

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21. Rosof, 132.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. 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. 22.
25. "Ancrene Wisse." In *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works*, edited by Nicholas Watson and Anne Savage. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991. 91-92.
26. McAvoy, Hughes-Edwards, 22.
27. Jn 3:4 NRSV.
28. Jn 3:5-6 NRSV.
29. 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.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 32.
32. Michelle M. Sauer. "'Pe blod þ[ar] 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.
33. Jn 19:34 New Revised Standard Version
34. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 3.66.3.
35. Literally, the enclosed garden, a medieval form of garden which suggested high, decorative shrubbery meant to afford strict privacy.
36. McQuinn, 98.
37. Ibid.
38. Ann Ball. *Catholic Traditions in the Garden*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1998. 44
39. Megan Cassidy-Welch. *Monastic Spaces and their Meanings: Thirteenth Century English Cistercian*

Monasteries. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2001. 233.

40. Ball, 44.