

ACQUIRIT QUI TUETUR¹: HALI MEIÐHAD AND MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S
LIBERATION THROUGH VIRGINITY

Acquirit qui tuetur: Hali Meiðhad y la Liberación de la Mujer Medieval a través de la Virginitad

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Abstract

This article joins a vibrant conversation about the concept of virginity and its relevance in the process of women's self-liberation during medieval times. The aim of this project is to shed some light on the concept of virginity and to analyse its interpretation in a time in which it was almost compulsory to follow society's patriarchal pattern. The study begins with a historical framework of this idea of corporeal sacredness followed by a new approach in which the contemporary perception is shattered. This article analyses the sociological and religious relevance of an idea conceived as the paramounts of holiness – thus proposing an alternative approach in which it is a defense weapon and not as a way of oppressing the female sex.

Keywords: Virginity, Sponsalia Christi, Imitatio Christi, Katherine Group, Ancrene Wisse, Feminine Virilis.

Resumen

Esta disertación se une a un apasionante diálogo sobre la virginidad y su relevancia para la liberación de la mujer en la época medieval. El objetivo es estudiar el concepto de virginidad y analizar su concepción en una época en la que adaptarse a las normas patriarcales de la sociedad era prácticamente obligatorio. El estudio comienza con una contextualización histórica de esta sacralidad seguida por un acercamiento al concepto en el que la percepción contemporánea de esta idea es fragmentada en cuanto a su significado. Este artículo analiza la relevancia sociológica y religiosa de este estado de pureza proponiendo un acercamiento en el que la virginidad funciona como un arma de defensa para la mujer, no como método de opresión.

Palabras clave: Virginidad, Sponsalia Christi, Imitatio Christi, Katherine Group, Ancrene Wisse, Feminine Virilis.

¹ "He who preserves something, will have something".

Virginité, albeit some highly prize it, Compared with marriage, had you tried them both, Differs as much as wine and water doth. Christopher Marlowe (2010: 50).

1. Introduction

The idea of female virginity has been an inherent aspect of many different societies around the world and has led to the creation of a wide myriad of opinions and perspectives across time and space. There were female virginity cults in Egypt, Greece, and among all the countries pertaining to the Roman culture, as well as in many places in Asia. However, it is in the aforementioned variety of approaches that societies have taken towards this idea where we can find conflicting opinions.

Different pagan cultures usually felt veneration towards the archetype of the virgin since they believed they were surrounded by magical powers, but the “magical” element actually came from the fact that women were not subordinated to men, they were free beings who had power over their bodies and minds. Regarding this issue, Marina Warner in *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Warner, 1976) adds the following:

“[...] in the case of pagan goddesses, the sign of the virgin rarely endorses chastity as a virtue...their sacred virginity symbolizes their autonomy and had little or no moral connotation. They spurned men because they were preeminent, independent, and alone...Her virginity signified she had retained freedom of choice” (Warner, 1976: 35).

Hence, the autonomy of women came from their capacity to break with that pre-established notion of chastity as powerful by itself, and use it in a way in which, instead of responding to the basis set to the female archetype, women found themselves in a place slightly more similar to that of the men of their time. It is during the Hellenistic period when the idea of chastity is linked to the concepts of virginity and the Christian representations of the virgin. This could have been influenced by the fact that one of the first translations of the Hebrew Bible is the Greek Septuagint, therefore it is not rare that the basic tenets of Christianity have had such an influence over the constitution of this notion. This is what Warner identifies with an approach “classical in spirit” (Warner, 1976: 37), since it is a pattern which has been widely repeated throughout time.

Nonetheless, during the Viking invasion all the preconceived ideas started to crumble. The Viking Age was the period going from the 8th to the 11th century when Scandinavian Norsemen explored and colonized many European areas causing the destruction of monasteries and the segregation of communities. The historian Peter Hunter Blair in his book *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (1956) explains how the Vikings at first had no particular hostility towards Christian

beliefs, even though they destroyed many areas and sacred places, and both literally and figuratively, shattered the structure of the religious communities. Before the arrival of the Danes, England was living what is known as the “golden age” of women’s monasticism and virginity was still a sacred matter associated to the tenants posed by the Hellenistic societies. In *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages* (2007) Sandy Bardsley narrates how when the Vikings attacked Coldingham, a city in Scotland, women tried to cut off their noses in order to not be appealing and avoid being raped by the invaders, thus preserving their virginity.

Besides this, Anglo-Saxon women were, in some ways, independent since they were allowed to own their own land and to inherit property. Nevertheless, it was only after a period of adaptation and merging within this new society they have created that a new wave of monasticism started to emerge, all due to the influence of the Irish church. After the “Gregorian Mission” or “Augustinian Mission” in which Pope Gregory the Great sent Saint Augustine of Canterbury to establish Christianity in the south of Great Britain, the Roman Church started influencing the attitude men had towards women. This was all due to the impact of the patristic doctrines in which women were perceived as threatening to the figure and salvation of men. During this time there was a need for the union of the idea of virginity, and the necessity of enclosure since they believed that their chastity vows could be easily broken without not only spiritual but also physical enclosure. In one letter written by Saint Jerome² to Eustochium³ he warns him of the danger the lack of physical enclosure could pose: “Cave ne domum exeas, ne velis videre filias regionis alienae . . . Dina egressa corrumpitur”⁴ (Fremantle, 1982: 83).

2. Methodology

The methodology used to carry out this study is based on the comparative analysis of the social reality of medieval women with the religious texts representative of that time, with the aim of addressing the issue of virginity both from a popular perspective and from the experiences of the nuns and anchoresses. The procedure based on approaching one main text - *Hali Meidhad* - whilst studying both the medieval and contemporary approach to the main topic, that of virginity and its reflection on the lives of medieval religious women.

² Saint Jerome was a 4th century priest, theologian and historian who commanded the translation of the Bible into Latin.

³ Saint Eustochium or Eustochium Julia was a 4th century Italian saint venerated for following a life of ascetic virginity.

⁴ Go not from home nor visit the daughters of a strange land. . . Dinah went out and was seduced.” (Fremantle, 1982: 83).

After a brief contextualization and a further explanation of the role of women in society in juxtaposition with their own bodily perception, a theory will be put forward, in which the concept of corporeal sacredness will be analyzed from a completely new perspective. In this approach, history will endorse the idea of the female body as a means of liberation from their subjugation to the male dominance – thus reflecting on virginity as the key to eventually achieve freedom. These results will eventually lead to a conclusion seeking not only congruence but also verisimilitude.

3. Theoretical Framework and Results

If there is something characteristic of the position of women during the Middle Ages is that they had no position at all. As it is known, men in Medieval times automatically fell into three categories: *oratores, bellatores, laboratores*. This socially active approach to the male role in society denoted that their existence was not exclusively linked to their marital status. A similar but extremely more passive and submissive differentiation was attributed to women who were classified according to their relationship with men – thus as virgins, wives, widows or prostitutes. D. H. Green analyses in the book *Women and Marriage in German Medieval Romance* how this distinction is perfectly represented in Bonizo's⁵ *Liber de Vita christiana* in which he refers to men in association to thirteen different ranks within the ecclesiastical world whereas women can only respond to two roles virgins and widows. Also, within these two roles, women's characters and attitudes were seen and socially portrayed as weak, a weakness once again subject to a two-fold interpretation: *simplicitas* (simplicity) or *mollities* (weakness). The means of breaking with this binarity is what the text we are about to analyse tries to elucidate.

The so-called Katherine Group is the name given to a set of texts belonging to a group of religious works written in prose, coming from West Midlands and dating from the early 13th century. This anthology consists of five different texts related to religious thought and to Hagiographic accounts, having among its titles the unfortunately not so spread treatise *Hali Meidhad* or *Holy Maidenhood*, written circa 1182. What unify the religious prose of the time are the stylistic and linguistic registers. In his analysis of this set of texts, J. R. R. Tolkien, an academic who needs no presentation, described the language used by the Katherine Group and the writers of the *Ancrene Wisse*⁶ “a standard language based on one in use in the West Midlands in the 13th century”. The stylistic variations and similarities helped him conjoin these two famous sets of treatises, and, afterwards, he coined the term “AB” language to refer to them. This idea of an “AB” language is not a randomized way of addressing these

⁵ Bonizo of Sutri or Bonitho was an 11th century Bishop of Sutri in Italy.

⁶ *Ancrene Wisse* or *Ancrene Riwe* – Guide for Anchoresses is a 13th Century monastic manual specially created for female anchorites.

manuscripts, on the contrary, since it contained the *Ancrene Wisse* an “A” is attributed to it, and since these manuscripts are archived under the name of MS Bodley a “B” is added to the identification. However, not only the linguistic aspects call the reader’s attention (Laing, 2011). There is a powerful discourse endorsing the idea of female freedom in association to an element to which it is seldom related nowadays, virginity: “Listen, daughter, and behold, and incline your ear; and forget your people and your father’s house” (Psalm 45: 10).

David the Psalmist⁷ is the protagonist of the opening lines of this famous treatise, whose aim was to encourage women to approach the concept of virginity as a spiritual weapon against a patriarchal structure, which was characterized by what is known as “social determinism”. Through the phrase “your people” David refers to the carnal thoughts, which draw women to physical desire and to an embrace of the marital condition leading them to believe that the only way of obtaining a feeling of fulfillment is through the subordination of women to the “powerful” figure of men. He encourages women to “forget” their people leaving earthly servitude behind. The people he is alluding to is that of Babylon, those who defied God’s power, hence they are “an army of the Devil of hell, who are plotting to lead the daughter of Zion⁸ into the world’s servitude” (Laing, 2011: 27). Zion represents the tower of Jerusalem and is associated the idea of virginity as a high state or “high vision”, which is its literal translation into English. In this metaphorical depiction of the virgin’s status, virgins are located in the highest position of the mountain “seeing all the world below” (Laing, 2011: 29) them, whereas married or widowed women are situated in the lower parts of the earth. An admonition is made against those who succumb to the earthly powers, not because they are not unified with God, but because that decision turns them into servants. This servitude deals with the objectification of the female sex and with its imminent descend into a lower position, a metaphorical place leading them “into the service of a man, so she has nothing that is freely her own” (Laing, 2011: 29). The social role of these cast-down women is represented as follows: “... [she] becomes a serf to a man and his slaves, to do and suffer all that he pleases... suffering trials and annoyances, and humiliation sometimes, bearing so many miseries for such poor wages as the world always pays in the end” (Laing, 2011: 31).

The rhetoric of slavery goes on presenting the reader with a sense of oppression that does not know of social classes, and affects women from poor but also rich backgrounds: “Ask these queens, these rich countesses, these proud ladies, about their way of life; certainly, if they give it careful thought and admit the truth...they are licking honey off thorns” (Laing, 2011: 34).

Through the fixed expression “lick honey off thorns” the author implies that any pleasure comes at a risk, and the loss of virginity automatically means the loss of freedom over their bodily and spiritual power, hence the so-called physical desire seems to “make war on Virginity” (Laing, 2011: 21) Nevertheless, this liberation from earthly submission is not exclusively achieved through the lack

⁷ David the Psalmist or King David is a biblical figure who reigned during the c. 1000 BCE.

⁸ Zion refers to the heavenly kingdom and hill of Jerusalem in which the city of David was founded.

of sexual interaction but also through spiritual redemption. In *Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages* (1983), Clarissa Atkinson argues how the idea of “holy maidenhood” ended up as a dichotomy since it was a physiological state but also a “moral condition”, an approach also developed in *De Virginitate* written by Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury Abbey during the 8th century.

There is a famous endorsement of this approach as explained by Kathleen Coyne in *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (2000) and it is the one written by Saint John Chrysostom in *Quod Regulares Feminae Viris Cohabitare non Debeant or On the Necessity of Guarding Virginity*: “It is not enough to be unmarried to be a virgin. There must be spiritual chastity [...] being unsoiled by life’s cares.” (Coyne, 2002: 5).

Spiritual chastity is an epiphenomenon of physiological cleanliness, thus implying they follow one another, but the existence of the former is not necessary for the survival of the latter. Nevertheless, there are many accounts of this event happening the other way around. During the Middle Ages the religious feminine prose arose, and women like Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, attained spiritual cleanness, even though they had lost their immaculateness. Once physical and spiritual purity have conjoined, women transform into angelic beings, but, far from Coventry Patmore’s misogynistic portrayal, this angelic being goes beyond the power of any human, and breaks with the submissive structure imposed to the feminine self. Following the beliefs of Saint John Chrysostom we find that virgins were seen as above the others and depicted as angels who were in the grace of God and who were liberated from this “sense of shame” marriage conveyed.

Another curious element found in this *molestiae nuptiarum*⁹ or anti-marriage rhetoric was that of “three states” of women as presented in the book. The text presents the idea of = that women could be described or “classified” according to their current sexual and social reality: virginity, widowhood, and marriage. It accounts for a portrayal of women’s bliss according to the stage in which they find themselves, “for marriage has its reward thirtyfold in heaven; widowhood, sixtyfold; virginity, with a hundredfold surpasses all”. Withal, albeit marriage was harshly criticized, there was still an option available for those who believed in the marital condition from a spiritual perspective, *sponsalia Christi*. It was Tertullian who proposed the idea of *sponsa Christi* as “a metaphor for consecrated virgins” (Salih, 2001: 57) and who, based on the works of Saint Paul, “depicted the congregation as a collective bride of Christ” (Salih, 2001: 61). The purity of these women was so that instead of settling for an earthly husband they would try to, metaphorically, marry God himself. This marriage was not a set of vows that ensured women’s submission to the ecclesiastic power; on the contrary, it was a set of “rules” which helped women find their capacity to be self-sufficient. Through the concept of *imitatio Christi*¹⁰ we also find how the virgin was equaled to the divinity “like him in integrity,

⁹ Common topic among twelfth-century churchmen, and religious writing emphasizing the wrongs and woes of marital life.

¹⁰ Latin for *Imitation of Christ* used to refer to a practice based on living and acting in the way Christ did – thus following the Christian ethics and spirituality.

spotless as his” (Laing, 2011: 22). It was a way of breaking the chains of that predetermined structure created by the society of the time, whilst undergoing the almost inevitable process of marriage. In *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, scholar Sarah Salih uses as the perfect example of this belief the figure of Katherine of Alexandria. Because of her rebellion to the established powers and her early interest in self-education, this martyr is usually represented as *sponsa Christi*, but also as two other relevant “labels”, *miles*¹¹ and *feminine virilis*¹². Along with this image of “heavenly marriage” and through the idea of *feminine virilis*, Katherine of Alexandria is portrayed as a being with masculine attributes, not regarding her physiognomy but her psychology.

This androgynous portrayal of women is yet another element, which resolves to give the female sex a new weapon against patriarchy and this narrative, is widened with the introduction of lesbianism in the rhetoric of female liberation. In *“Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianism* (2000), Judith M. Bennet identified “lesbian-like” attitudes, among all other meanings attributed to the term, with “women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage” (Bennet, 2000: 46), thus confronting the established model and the previously fixed social roles of the time. This is the reason why many scholars have identified a “lesbian-like” attitude adhered to this text, since the author encourages young women to go against that assumed set of values, find freedom through virginity and through a strong belief in the concept of sisterhood.

4. Conclusion

Virginity has been interpreted as the epitome of perfection but also as one of the two or three restrictive representations of the female sex. Through this narrative, the texts belonging to the Katherine group and Holy Maidenhood in particular, propose an alternative through a topos that is seen nowadays as the result of centuries of women submission to the patriarchal patterns of society but that in that time, paradoxically worked as a form of escaping it.

The complexity of medieval religious texts goes beyond what contemporary critics may expect and understand. For many scholars it has been almost impossible to conceive freedom related to a passionate encouragement of virginity or through the intervention of the church, and for this same reason monastic writings and medieval women writers like Christine de Pisan have been harshly criticized as not fit for a feminist narrative. But, how are we to criticize the actions of women in a time in which they were allowed no action at all? These women laid the foundation of what Virginia

¹¹ Latin for *soldier* used to refer to the quintessential form of virility and masculinity.

¹² Latin for *feminine virility* alluding to a women with male-like or male-identified features both physical and behavioral.

Woolf will later coin as the *outsider's society*, who without even being aware of the existence of a glass ceiling, decided to gather all their weapons in order to break it.

The reason why *Hali Meidhad* is still considered an essential text within the English literary tradition is because, as the result of this paper shows, opened a door to those females who felt uncomfortable playing the part of the objectified wife, and decided to pursue independence through a path of solitude, chastity, and self-discovery.

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