

Disintegrating Bodies in Osbern Bokenham's Legends of Saint Christine and Saint Margaret¹

Katharine Leigh Goldenhuys

Although gender concerns are often a crucial aspect of the study of the body in saints' legends it has become such a major focus in the study of Saint Christine, in particular, that other salient features have frequently been neglected. One such issue is the treatment of bodies and their disintegration in terms of the traditional late medieval Christian milieu. According to Bynum 'by the thirteenth century the prevalent concept of person was of a psychosomatic unity' and 'the orthodox position in eschatology required resurrection of body—as well as soul at the end of time' (*Fragmentation and Redemption* 183). Therefore, death may be seen as the disintegration of a psychosomatic entity, involving the separation of the soul from the body, and resurrection, which, it was believed, would occur at the Final Judgement, as their reintegration.²

The focus here will be on possible religious interpretations of the disintegration of bodies in the legends of Saint Christine and Saint Margaret in Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* (Serjeantson) in terms of this notion of disintegration and reintegration of bodies, which may be regarded as parallel to the Christian concepts of death and resurrection. The senses given in the *Middle English Dictionary* for 'body' serve as a convenient point of entry into this subject: 'An organized whole; an organism, an organization, a union'; the 'whole physical frame of a living being; physique, body'; and a 'dead body, a corpse' (Kurath and Kuhn 1005–08). My discussion will be structured according to these three definitions of the word. Firstly, each martyr will be discussed in terms of her separation from her family and the pagan society (both social bodies) of which she forms a part. This disintegration of pagan social bodies will be shown to take place as a result of, and in order to allow, the martyr's integration into a new Christian 'family'. Secondly, the allusions to death and resurrection in the tortures inflicted on, and the disintegration of, the physical bodies of the

martyrs will be considered. Finally, the significance of Bokenham's treatment of the translation of Margaret's relics will be examined in terms of disintegration (death) and reintegration (resurrection). These images will be shown to point figurally to various Biblical events that relate to the Passion and Resurrection.

The texts of the legends of Christine and Margaret have been little studied, particularly in Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, which was probably written between 1443 and 1447 (Serjeantson xv). Indeed, the text as a whole seems to have generated only a modest amount of academic interest. Delany's *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England* is apparently the only major recent study of Bokenham's work. The individual stories of Christine and Margaret do not, however, receive any extensive treatment. The legend of Saint Christine in Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (Brown-Grant 218–23) has proved to be a relatively popular text to study but generally to the exclusion of other renderings of the legend. Saint Margaret has received limited treatment, usually in the Katherine-Group version. Works dealing with these two martyrs have tended to focus strongly on gender issues, especially when aspects of the body are under consideration.³

Both Christine and Margaret break away from the social bodies in which they were fostered by converting to Christianity and thus rejecting the pagan religion of that society and their parents, in favour of a new Christian 'family'. As each is apparently the only child in the family this leads to the immediate disintegration of the nuclear family, a basic social unit. In Margaret's case it is stated that after her mother's death 'she forsook al hyr hey lynage' (line 390) in order to live with her Christian nurse, refusing to return to her father (lines 386–92). Her rejection of her father, Theodosius, may be seen as a simultaneous rejection of her family and their pagan religion as her father was 'of paynymrye the patryark' (line 341) and, therefore, hated her for converting to Christianity (lines 393–95). When Olibrius asks her of what family she is, she replies that she is a Christian (lines 512–18). Later, while in prison she prays:

Behold me, lord, wych am the only
Doughtyr of my fader, and he hath me
For the forsakyn, and so hym haue y.
Hens aftyr wil thou my fadyr be!
(lines 673–76).

She has, therefore, clearly been completely ostracised from her earthly, physical family and accepted Christ as her spiritual father instead.

Christine's rejection of paganism and her family receives more extensive treatment and becomes increasingly dramatic, culminating in her father becoming her first persecutor. She initially converts to Christianity but keeps it a secret from her parents (lines 2123–30) and does not sacrifice to their idols (lines 2147–54). After praying that she should never be turned from her faith, not even by her father or mother (lines 2163–74), she reveals her faith to the maidens who are in the tower with her (lines 2211–26) and then to her father (lines 2251–90). When she finally physically demonstrates her new faith by destroying the bodies of the idols and throwing the gold and silver of which they are made out of the window to be distributed amongst the poor (lines 2339–46), her father becomes enraged (lines 2347–54) and begins to submit her to various torments. Bokenham has her explicitly substitute Christ for her parents. She says to her mother: 'My name I haue of cryst my creatour. | He is my fadir, he is modir also' (lines 2426–27), 'Clepe me not doughtyr; here I þe forsake' (line 2436), and to her father: 'cryst my fadir is, and noon but he' (line 2503). The emphasis is, however, on her father as her first tormentor.⁴

The focus on the father of the martyr may be due to the idea of the rejection of the Christian child by the pagan father that can be traced to a Biblical source in Mark 13.12, an important text concerning the troubles and persecutions to be faced by Christians for their faith and often applied to martyrs especially. Here it is stated that: 'the brother shall betray his brother unto death, and the father his son; and children shall rise up against the (*sic.*) parents, and shall work their death.'⁵ Furthermore, the focus on the rejection by earthly fathers of their Christian offspring allows the emphasis of the idea of Christ as the true spiritual father of the Christian thus underlining the martyr's rejection of the earthly, pagan and physical in favour of the Heavenly, Christian and spiritual. Christine's soul is saved by her spiritual father and according to medieval religious belief, He would also resurrect her body at the Final Judgement, while her earthly father can only attack her flesh.

Not only do Christine's and Margaret's conversions to Christianity result in their suffering physical tortures but they also lead to disintegration within the pagan societies that they reject. In Christine's case one thousand five hundred pagans are killed by fire after she prays to God for a sign to convince non-believers of His omnipotence (lines 2475–95). The idol in the temple of Apollo crumbles to dust after she asks God in prayer that this should happen. She then

preaches to those pagans present, pointing out the folly of believing in a 'god' that can be destroyed in this way. As a result three thousand are converted to Christianity and pray to God that they may never forsake their new religion 'powe we shuld dye' (lines 2772–2820). Thus through the destruction of their god, the death of many, and the conversion of still more, this pagan society is disintegrating (while a new Christian society is being formed). Quilligan has also noted that both death and conversion may be viewed as 'violence against the pagan others' (*Allegory of Female Authority* 221). Bokenham was an Augustinian friar and a Doctor of Divinity (Serjeantson xiii). His original audience was a predominantly 'lay female pious audience' (Edwards 164) and the various legends were also compiled by Thomas Burgh into 'a larger work' for a group of nuns (Edwards 157 and 167). Therefore, from the perspective of this Christian readership the conversion of these pagans would certainly have been viewed as a positive event, one that would lead to their (the pagans') salvation. What seems more problematic is the attitude of this readership to the mass destruction of the unrepentant. The pagans are killed, however, when Christine asks God for a sign to convince them of His omnipotence. By preserving Christine and destroying one thousand five hundred pagans God's ultimate power over life (integration) and death (disintegration) may be seen to be definitively illustrated.

Similarly, when, in the legend of Margaret, Olibrius repeatedly offers to cease his torments if she will renounce her Christianity and recognise his gods (lines 554–56, 660–62 and 780–84), her refusal, which leads to further tortures from which she emerges unscathed, results in five thousand pagan witnesses being converted and martyred (lines 806–14). It is ironic that these attempts to bring one person back to paganism result in thousands converting to Christianity.

Let us now consider the allusions to death and resurrection in the tortures inflicted upon Christine and Margaret. The disintegration of their bodies reflects not only Christ's Passion, but also the Harrowing of Hell and Resurrection. This is not surprising as martyrs were 'the focus of veneration in the Church' as they 'had followed Christ's example literally' (Cross and Livingstone 1046). A significant aspect of Christine's legend is the fact that she is fed by angels who bring her bread. This may be seen as reminiscent of the bread of the Eucharist, which was considered to have become at the consecration the real body of Christ. Saint Gregory (c. 540–604) saw the service of the Mass as a literal re-creation of the Passion of Christ so as to gain renewed absolution from sin for all Christians (Harris 7). Furthermore, this reference is important as it reminds the reader not only of the Eucharist and Christ's Passion, but also of the Last Supper (Matthew

26.26–30). The bread may be interpreted here as Christine's last supper before she suffers her own passion for the Christian faith. The immortality offered to the Christian through Christ's Passion is specifically referred to:

Gramercy, lord, ful off goodnesse,
Wych me a loof of immortalite
Hast sent in tokyn off foryifnesse
Off my synnys þrough þi pyte
(lines 2331–34).

Christine's very next action (after receiving the bread) is to break her father's gold and silver idols and to distribute the pieces to the poor (lines 2339–46). As a result Urban has the twelve maidens (who were entrusted with her care) beheaded and Christine is beaten until her tormentors become weary, while she appears to remain unhurt (lines 2371–89). Therefore, the breaking of the bodies of the pagan idols and the decapitation of the pagan maidens is framed by a reminder of the broken body of Christ in the form of bread and Christine's beaten flesh. Christine is presented as impervious to her tortures. As the original readers of this text would have believed, Christ's Passion was followed by His Resurrection (victory over death), which led to the redemption of humankind. These images, therefore, serve as a contrast to the idols which, once broken, remain so and have no power to save their followers (the maidens) while Christ can save His (Christine and other Christians).

While being tortured by Julyan, Christine is thrown in an oven for three days but emerges unharmed. This creates a parallel with Christ's Harrowing of Hell when He traditionally descended to Hell for three days between His death and Resurrection. It also recalls the Old Testament incident in Daniel 3.19–30 when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego emerged from the fiery furnace unscathed, which may be viewed as a *figura* of Christ's death, entombment and Resurrection and also, therefore, of the Harrowing of Hell. Indeed, when Zyon tries to have her burned to death in a vessel 'Full of py[c]he, rosen, oyle & smere' (line 2709) she prays to be preserved as were the 'thre chyldryn' who were thrown into 'þe flaummyd furnes' (lines 2719–20).

Another example of the victory of life over death is when snakes are thrown onto Christine but do not harm her. They subsequently kill the snake charmer who is resurrected when Christine prays to Christ (lines 2931–94). This scene recalls the Old Testament prefiguration of the crucifixion referred to in John

3.14–15 in which Moses had to place a bronze snake on a pole so that the Jewish people would be healed of snake bite if they looked at it (Numbers 21.4–9). Ashton states that the ‘sexual symbolism is obvious’ in this scene (151) and this may be so for a modern reader; however, for the original readers of this text the religious symbolism (including its allusions to the Fall and the Resurrection with its associated victory over the death brought about by the Fall) would probably have been more apparent.

The same is true of the scene where her breasts are cut off (lines 3011–18). The wound in Christ’s side was often referred to as the wound in Christ’s breast in the Middle Ages and this saving wound and the nurturing breast of Mary were frequently paralleled. Both the lactating Virgin and the blood flowing from Christ’s side were associated with the Eucharist (Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* 102–03). According to Timmers (91) the wound in Christ’s side was often seen as a symbol of the birth of the Church from the side of the Redeemer. Therefore, milk and blood flow from Christine’s severed breasts to indicate her ‘clennes of uirginite’ (line 3017).⁶ Her wounds also serve as a simultaneous reminder of Christ’s birth (milk) and death (blood), which was believed to make the salvation of all humanity possible.

A powerful image of death and resurrection, which could easily be over-looked in this legend, is Christine’s baptism (lines 2539–86). Saint Paul associates baptism symbolically with Christ’s death and Resurrection and thus also the resurrection of body and soul which the Christian may look forward to. In Colossians 2.12 he states that we are: ‘Buried with him in baptism, in whom also you are risen again by the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him up from the dead.’ This concept is dealt with in greater detail in Romans 6.3–11. In the episode of Christine’s baptism Urban is trying to kill her (a disintegration of body and soul) by having her cast into the ocean with a stone tied round her neck. Instead angels save her physically and Christ secures her spiritual salvation by baptising her. The fact that she would have been completely submerged is noteworthy as, as Schowalter (74) has noted, the method of baptism where the person is submerged (versus merely sprinkling water on the head) fits best with Paul’s image of being buried with Christ. Furthermore, martyrdom was from the earliest times viewed as the ‘baptism of blood’ and was believed to be equivalent to normal baptism. From the end of the second century the anniversary of the death of a martyr, referred to as their *natalis* or Heavenly birthday, was observed (Cross and Livingstone 1046). Thus, death, and re-birth or resurrection (in spiritual terms, at least), were seen as closely related occurrences.

The same is true for Margaret. In Olibrius's attempts to destroy her body and kill her, images of resurrection may be found. Her sides are burnt to the bone (lines 800–02). The specific attack of her sides during her martyrdom also serves to allude to the wound made in Christ's side at the Passion (John 19.34) and the idea of the birth of the Church from it. She is then plunged into cold water, an image of baptism. As with Christine, she too appears to be completely submerged, therefore paralleling Paul's conception of the Christian being buried and resurrected with Christ through baptism. Olibrius even refers to his water-torture as baptism (line 798). In the thirteenth century English version of Saint Margaret's legend from the Katherine-Group this scene is treated in detail as a baptism (Millet and Wogan-Browne 76). This text may have been familiar to Bokenham and his readers but at the very least it indicates that this scene may be interpreted as a baptism. Ashton notes that failed attempts to torture and kill saints by means of fire may be viewed as a re-inscription of the fire 'as the fire of baptism or the flames of the Pentecost' (146). Furthermore, Margaret is released from the torments of fire and water by an earthquake sent by God, emerging unharmed (lines 799–812). This event recalls the earthquake that took place when Christ died resulting in graves breaking open and numerous people of God being raised to life (Matthew 27.51–53), another instance of resurrection in the midst of apparent destruction.

The devil was often depicted as a dragon due to his portrayal as such in Revelation 12.7–9 (Ferguson 16). The disintegration of the body of the dragon (which had swallowed Margaret) due to the power of Margaret's cross may be seen as reminiscent of the Biblical story of Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale and three days later disgorged. This incident is referred to as a pre-figuration of Christ's death, entombment and Resurrection in Matthew 12.38–41. This scene may thus also be seen as recalling the Harrowing of Hell. It is also reminiscent of a birth (or similarly may be seen as a re-birth or resurrection), thus Margaret's request for special help for women in labour who call on her name (lines 841–44). Notably, due to the unfamiliarity of artists with the whale, it sometimes resembled a dragon in depictions of Jonah's story (Ferguson 26). The fact that it is Margaret's cross that causes the dragon to burst makes it clear that it is Christ's Passion (broken body) that brings victory (reintegration) over the devil, sin and death (disintegration).

Let us now turn to the treatment of the disintegration of Margaret's corpse or relics in terms of images of death and resurrection. The story of the translation of Margaret's relics follows a recurrent pattern of destruction and renewal. When

Antioch and the church there where her relics are preserved are destroyed (lines 974–80), the abbot, Austyn, decides to move her relics to the city of Pauye in Italy (lines 998–1036). Austyn is taken ill in Italy and dies before reaching his intended destination, however, and Margaret's body is then left at a convent of black monks in the valley of Palantes near Souters (lines 1075–1183). After the convent is destroyed her body is moved to a church in Ruylyan (lines 1184–1201), which also eventually falls into ruin (lines 1205–11). Later (at Margaret's instigation), a hermit from the area of 'Naplys' and 'Teracyne', John, finds her relics (lines 1226–1325) and they are moved to Mount Flask (lines 1331–82) or Montefiascone. This process may be viewed as a repeated death and resurrection of various Christian churches (social religious bodies). This is noteworthy as the Church is viewed as the body of Christ (Ephesians 1.22; Colossians 1.24). Also, Christ is depicted as the head of the Church with all Christians forming the rest of the body (Ephesians 5.23; Colossians 1.18). The process may, therefore, be seen as reflecting the death and Resurrection of Christ and, potentially, of all Christians, as does the continual loss and recovery of Margaret's relics.

When Margaret's body is first moved, Austyn, with the help of Lucas and Robert, have to steal it away by night (lines 1044–64). This is reminiscent of the concern of the chief priests and Pharisees that Christ's disciples would steal His body and claim that he had been raised from death (Matthew 27.62–66). This allusion serves to remind the reader of the belief in the true Resurrection of Christ.

Since the Second Council of Nicaea (787) no church could be consecrated without the relics of a saint (Cross and Livingstone 1379); thus Austyn gives one of Margaret's ribs for the consecration of a church at Souters (lines 1092–1106). As a result, a new church comes into being due to the disintegration of Margaret's corpse. Her body also allows another church to be established at the sight of Beucase's house in Mount Flask (lines 1348–76). The destruction of the various churches above also allows her relics to be moved and to be used in the consecration of new churches. When the hermit, John, digs up Margaret's coffin he finds Felicity's body as well, and three aromatic ribs of the martyred healers Cosmas and Damian. The coffin was inscribed, stating that the bodies of Margaret and Felicity were inside, but Bokenham does not question how they knew whose the ribs were (lines 1322–330). The authenticity of relics was seldom doubted, however, as the significance of their discovery was generally seen as a miraculous sign of divine favour (see Thurston). Furthermore, Bokenham claims that his

life was saved by a ring that had been in contact with Margaret's foot preserved in an old priory near his home in England (lines 135–70). As a result, a fragment of Margaret's body may be seen as being responsible for preserving his life and he subsequently reproduced her legend. This is consistent with the idea that the division and distribution of relics meant that the saint's power was spread (Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* 317).

Thus, in conclusion, we may see that various kinds of disintegrating bodies may be discerned in these texts. Although these disintegrations are often violent and may be interpreted in terms of gender, the dominant interpretation should be based on religious concerns, since as saints' legends, their primary function was religious instruction and edification. As a result, all of these disintegrations would most likely have been interpreted in positive terms by the original Christian audience. The disintegration of pagan social structures allows the establishment of Christian communities. The torture of the saint leads to the conversion of many pagans. The saint's martyrdom ensures her future resurrection (at the Final Judgement). Dismemberment of the martyr's corpse makes the consecration of new churches and the subsequent establishment of new Christian communities possible. Furthermore, the Biblical figurations serve to inculcate these texts with multiple layers of religious meaning befitting such legends of martyrdom. These texts thus serve to reflect the religious concerns of the society in which they were created and as modern scholars we should strive to ensure that our interpretations reflect *that* society and not our own.

NOTES

1. This article is an edited version of an essay submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of my M.Phil. degree at Cambridge University.
2. The idea of this 'psychosomatic unity' (and its dismemberment) is vividly illustrated by Bokenham (Serjeantson) in his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* when, for example, Saint Katherine is beheaded: 'And wyth oo st[r]oke went þe same stounde | The soule to heuene & þe body to grounde' (lines 7337–38).
3. See, for example: Ashton 140–57; Quilligan, *Allegory of Female Authority* 212–34 and 'Translating Dismemberment'; Robertson; Semple; Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*. For a modern translation of Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* see: *A Legend of Holy Women*, ed. Sheila Delany.

4. Christine's legend is 1039 lines long (lines 2099–3138). The section dealing with the reaction of her parents (particularly her father) to her rejection of paganism takes up 391 lines of the text (lines 2251–2642), but her mother is only present for thirty five of these lines (lines 2403–38).
5. All Biblical quotations are taken from the Douay Rheims version.
6. Similarly, when Katherine is beheaded, milk instead of blood runs from her neck (lines 7341–45). Bokenham does not explain the meaning of this miracle in his text but in his 'fadrys book, maystyr Ioon Capgrau' (line 6356) it is said to be a sign of Katherine's 'virginall clenness' (Winstead, *Life of Saint Katherine*, Book 5, line 1898).

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