

Audience and Authority in the South English Legendary 'Life of St Katherine'

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the reception history of the 'Life of Saint Katherine' as it appears in the *South English Legendary*, a popular collection of Middle English saints' lives circulating among male and lay audiences in late medieval England. In light of the proliferation of preaching aids and sermon materials intended for the clerical instruction of lay parishioners, as well as the rise in lay piety from the thirteenth century onward, I argue that the audiences of the *South English Legendary* would have found political, social, and religious utility in the representation of Saint Katherine. While Katherine's *vitae* sometimes minimize her disputatious speech and emphasize her devotional appeal, the *South English Legendary* exploits her bold voice, sophisticated education, and defiance of oppressive authority figures. This version upholds the image of a virgin martyr who undermines patriarchal structures but also abandons the dynamics of gendered power by privileging men and women alike as religious radicals, advocating not a contemplative life but an active pursuit of freedom from constraining institutions. The *South English Legendary* innovatively frames Katherine's disobedience to paternal authority as heroic and underscores the construction of Christian community through conversion, precisely because it imagines a medieval audience concerned with its own flexibility before figures of control.

AUDIENCE AND AUTHORITY IN THE SOUTH ENGLISH LEGENDARY 'LIFE OF ST KATHERINE'

In various medieval female saints' lives or *vitae*, a holy female outsider enters a community ruled by a corrupt authority figure, challenges him, and consequently, as punishment, faces torture. After sensational displays of resistance, the saintly figure is killed, but the activity of her relics and reliquary, often simply her tomb, signifies her incorruptible flesh, divine status, and postmortem healing power. As early as they appear in England, hagiographical accounts of the third- or fourth-century Saint Katherine of Alexandria trace her biography and follow the normative pattern of a saint's life. However, the many 'Lives of Saint Katherine' also feature a female saint who undermines orthodox authority, often developing her hagiography beyond the *passio* narrative, the account of the saint's martyrdom, to which virgin-martyr legends sometimes are limited. In this additional sequence, Katherine's encounter with the pagan Emperor Maxentius in Alexandria in Egypt occasions her to espouse Christian doctrine. In certain versions, Katherine becomes even more than the receptacle for the Word of God. Her bold, yet courteous speech, classical education, and theological wisdom prove so subversive of paternal authority that she and her converts are sent almost immediately to undergo torture and martyrdom.

In most versions, Katherine's *vita* illustrates a paradigm of saintly female behavior that

powerfully undermines patriarchal structures and questions claims to political authority, more broadly. Katherine's open resistance to such control explains why the authors of various medieval legendaries and independent *vitae* were able to adapt this particular saint's *vita* for various audiences. Katherine's *vita* was revised in at least fourteen Middle English versions, which reflects, in many cases, the desire that authors and compilers felt to make her life applicable and accessible to the social and cultural milieus in which her cult was thriving. Manuscript evidence demonstrates that female audiences, whose visibility in Middle English literary culture and religious culture increased substantially during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, were especially receptive to Katherine's *vitae* in the vernacular language. Osborn Bokenham's *Ledendys of Hooly Wummen*, which was commissioned by a female lay patroness in the mid-fifteenth century, indicates Katherine's appeal to secular women.¹ The saint's appearance in courtesy literature for young women, and in the fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe*, in which Margery's *imitatio* during her pilgrimage focuses centrally on Katherine among the virgin martyrs, also testifies to a secular female audience interested in Katherine's story.

Certain hagiographical accounts of Katherine circulating in England, notably the 'Life' contained in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 34, were also popular within religious communities of women in England beginning in the thirteenth century, offering female-specific models for envisioning the individual's relationship with the divine. Bodley 34, which was probably compiled for a group of solitary, unmarried anchoresses in the West Midlands in the early thirteenth century, and which later circulated more broadly, contains a unique version of the *vita* of Katherine with characteristics that suggest an address to female devotional audiences.² In this narrative, Katherine is a royal princess and consecrated virgin who escapes earthly marriage to become the *sponsa Christi*, the ethereal virgin bride of Christ. The author emphasizes Katherine's virginity and her extensive theological knowledge, extending the saint's importance for not only an audience of virgin *milites Christi* aiming to avoid worldly

¹ Osborn Bokenham, *A Legend of Holy Women: Osborn Bokenham's Legends of Holy Women*, trans. Sheila Delany (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992). For a discussion of the images of virgin martyrs in conduct literature, see Katherine J. Lewis, "Model Girls? Virgin-Martyrs and the Training of Young Women in Late Medieval England," in *Young Medieval Women*, eds. Katherine J. Lewis, Kim M. Phillips, and Noel James Menuge (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 25-46.

² Contemporary scholarship has focused on the illustrations and discourses of female sanctity within these narratives to construct arguments about the devotional imagination and pious practices of female audiences and readers in the Middle Ages. See Elizabeth Ann Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990). According to Robertson, "MS Bodley 34 is the manuscript most likely to have been associated with the anchoresses of Wigmore Abbey," 207.

temptation through reclusiveness but also groups of women devoted to religious learning. Just as a work like the *Ancrene Wisse* presented the faceless women of an isolated religious community with authorizing conceptions of the spiritual life, theoretically transforming their isolation into something generative, the works of Bodley 34 empower female audiences.³ For instance, as Sarah Salih writes, “Medieval women could use the principle dramatized in virgin martyr legends, that consent makes a marriage, for their own purposes, as did Margery Paston when she married against her family’s wishes” and Christina of Markyate, whose “use of virgin martyr topoi...authorized her to resist her parents, her husband, and a clutch of bishops.”⁴ Many of Katherine’s *vitae* envision the female saint in diverse roles that could be appropriated by a range of English women. The multitude of female-specific paradigms offered by the narratives of this virgin martyr testifies to how, as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne writes, “hagiography...can be creatively interpreted by individual medieval women for their own purposes.”⁵

However, while manuscript and textual evidence point to female interest in Katherine’s *vitae*, especially since they legitimized women’s religious independence, hagiographical accounts of Katherine also gained popularity within groups of male readers and audiences in late medieval England. According to Kerryn Olsen, “where many English saints’ lives were previously written for a particular religious house, by the end of the thirteenth century, they are found attached to larger collections of more universal saints.”⁶ Furthermore, as Sarah Salih points out, “of all female saints, legendary and contemporary, virgin martyrs were the most popular...[and] their cults included men and women, lay and religious people.”⁷ In fact, in many cases, male communities formed far broader reaching audiences than female communities did, and the question of how they interpreted Katherine is perhaps more provocative, in light of her unique female authority, her audacious confrontation with male claims to intellectual and spiritual superiority, and her mystical marriage to Christ. In particular,

³ According to Bella Millet, with the assistance of George S. Jack and Yoko Wada, *Hali Meiðhad*, a sermon contained in Bodley 34, is addressed to virgins, and the saints’ lives in the manuscript “are addressed to a general lay audience...intended mainly for lay readers and listeners, whether enclosed as recluses or living in the world,” in *Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature, vol. II, Ancrene Wisse, The Katherine Group, and the Wooing Group* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 15.

⁴ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 50.

⁵ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “Powers of Record, Powers of Example: Hagiography and Women’s History,” in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 71.

⁶ Kerryn Olsen, “Women and Englishness: Anglo-Saxon Female Saints in the *South English Legendary*,” *Limina* 19 (2003): 2-3.

⁷ Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, 46.

a female saint who disputed vigorously with men on theological and philosophical questions inevitably presented challenges to a culture that valued male clericalism and that may have deemed female speech an insubordinate act.

The incongruity between a narrative emphasizing female-specific authority and a male audience caused certain versions to minimize Katherine's learning, one of her more remarkable tools for defying patriarchal figures in her *vita*. John Mirk's *Festial* (c. 1382-90), an influential orthodox collection of homilies, demonstrates Katherine's exemplary piety, but severely contains her voice, omitting her lengthy disputes with figures of control to decentralize her scholarly power and rendering her passive by foregrounding God's intercession in her protection. Compressing scenes that display Katherine's intellectual abilities, Mirk writes on Katherine's conversion of the 50 wise men: "when Kateryn had spoken wyth hom a lytyll whyle, by helpe of þe Holy Gost, scho conuerted hom, so þat þay leuet on Crist, and wold gladly take deth for his loue" ("when Katherine had spoken with them for awhile, with the help of the Holy Ghost, she converted them, so that they believed in Christ, and would gladly die for his love").⁸ Here, Mirk does not elaborate on Katherine's persuasive rational argumentation, as the *vitae* sometimes do to establish that Katherine's authority equals that of male clerics. Mirk neglects this detail and instead credits the influence of divine inspiration upon the men's act of conversion. With the rise in women's piety, the *vita* of Katherine likely proposed empowering ideals of female sanctity and encouraged the practice of *imitatio*. It also might have appealed to Lollard preaching movements in the later Middle Ages through its depiction of Katherine's defiance toward traditional authority. However, writing for a specific reading community of male parish priests, Mirk contains this impression and uses his narrative to reinforce an official and masculine clerical authority.⁹

By contrast, the *South English Legendary*, a widely popular medieval collection of inherited and revised saints' lives that circulated among men, exploits unconventional saintly authority in its representation of Katherine. This legendary first was composed in the second half of the thirteenth century, based loosely on Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, one of

⁸ John Mirk, *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies by Johannes Mirkus (John Mirk)*. Edited from Bodl. MS Gough Eccl. Top. 4, with Variant Readings from Other MSS, ed. Theodor Erbe (London: EETS, 1905), 275.

⁹ For more on this context, see Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 14. Separately, Mirk's adjustments to Katherine's *vita* are less surprising when viewed in the framework of what Salih describes as Mirk's warning to "Margaret's devotees against privatizing their worship of her," indicating "a rift between lay and clerical versions" of the cults of the virgin martyrs, in *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, 46.

the most common and comprehensive hagiographical collections in late medieval England.¹⁰ The *Legenda aurea*, which was completed around 1266, circulated across a wide geographical area of England, and because the number of legends varies from manuscript to manuscript, scholars have been able to speculate about which of the narratives shaped the lives of the *South English Legendary*.¹¹ Manuscript evidence suggests that the hagiographer of the *vita* of Katherine found the source-text in the *Legenda aurea*, indicating influence in colophons, as in the case of the manuscript London, Lambeth Palace Library, Lambeth 223, which was copied for the layman Thomas Wotton around 1400, and which contains the complete *South English Legendary* but “misnames itself *Legenda aurea*,” as Antonina Harbus explains in her discussion of the figure of St. Helena in the *South English Legendary*.¹²

Despite the connections that can be drawn between the *South English Legendary* and its source-texts and other versions of Katherine’s *vitae*, the *South English Legendary* differs in the way that it stresses the heroic nature of Katherine’s disobedience to authority. If saints are “repositories of cultural fantasy” for its devotees,¹³ this *vita* suggests an audience highly receptive to episodes of female agency and subversive sanctity. Katherine’s *vita* in the *South English Legendary* emphasizes not only a female-specific relationship to Christ but also, more broadly, the development of pious converts both male and female, who wield control, especially in the form of verbal argumentation and resistance, to defy tyranny. While Katherine’s *vita* in Bodley 34 presents a saint-figure with whom lay and pious women could identify, this perhaps more politicized narrative suggests an audience concerned with its own flexibility before institutions of authority.

First, the religious, social, and institutional changes of the late Middle Ages contextualize the emphases and inventions of the *South English Legendary* hagiographer. By the thirteenth century, affective meditation and religious experience had begun to move beyond

¹⁰ Regarding the relationship between the *Legenda aurea* and the *South English Legendary*, Manfred Görlach posits that the influence of the *Legenda aurea* on the *South English Legendary* was only marginal, in *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary* (Leeds: The University of Leeds, 1974), 27. Görlach writes, “It is *a priori* likely that the first ‘translator’ and compiler followed a model, but major differences in the length and in the style of the existing SEL legends and homiletic pieces suggest that the poems derive from different source collections, and were possibly translated by different authors.”

However, in a much earlier study, Minnie E. Wells argues for clearer connections between copies of the two works in “The *South English Legendary* in relation to the *Legenda aurea*,” *PMLA* 51 (1936): 337-360.

¹¹ M. Görlach, “The *Legenda aurea* and the Early History of the *South English Legendary*,” in *Legenda aurea: Sept Siècles de Diffusion*, ed. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau (Montréal and Paris: Éditions Bellarmin, 1986), 302-3.

¹² Antonina Harbus, *Helena of Britain in Medieval Legend* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 112.

¹³ Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, 44.

cloister walls and into public and private lay spaces. The Fourth Lateran Council, convoked by Pope Innocent III in 1215, devised plans and procedures for the Church to heighten control over pious practices developing among the laity, especially by making the clerical order responsible for instructing communities.¹⁴ Works including Mirk's late-fourteenth to early-fifteenth-century *Instructions for Parish Priests*, derived from William of Pagula's *Oculus Sacerdotis*, educated parish priests in their pastoral and catechetical responsibilities.¹⁵ The Council's mandate of annual confession and the taking of the Eucharist stressed the gravity of individual salvation, and simultaneously, the Sacrament of Penance helped to normalize clerical intercession.¹⁶ As Eamon Duffy writes in *The Stripping of the Altars*, "the penitent needed to know how, what, and when to confess," and "the priest needed to be able to distinguish between what was serious and what was trivial."¹⁷ The Church thus created a system of education for both clerical and lay populations.

The Fourth Lateran Council inadvertently became the impetus for new religious texts, intended to make materials directly accessible to those who were not clerically-trained; the Church inevitably faced a gap between what it could control and what clerical and lay audiences received and could access.¹⁸ The proliferation of preaching aids, *artes praedicandi* for modeling sermons, and vernacular treatises including the fourteenth-century *Speculum Vitae*, frequently combined instructive works with entertaining vernacular exempla to capture the interest of pious audiences.¹⁹ The production of highly graphic, entertaining, and polyvocal legendaries in increasingly portable forms also shaped the *temporale* and *sanctorale*, the two largest cycles of the liturgical year, making these materials an appealing resource for lay

¹⁴ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 54-5.

¹⁵ John Myrc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. E. Peacock, *EETS* 31 (1868; rev. 1902; reprint 1996).

¹⁶ Canon 2 of the Decrees of the Council dictates the appointment of a master to instruct the clerics and poor students, and Canon 21 mandates the individual's act of confession to the parish priest, authorizing the intercessor's salvific potential: "Let the priest be discreet and cautious that he may pour wine and oil into the wounds of the one injured after the manner of a skillful physician, carefully inquiring into the circumstances of the sinner and the sin, from the nature of which he may understand what kind of advice to give and what remedy to apply, making use of different experiments to heal the sick one." Brian Tierney, ed., *The Middle Ages: Sources of Medieval History*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1999), 220.

¹⁷ Duffy, 54. In addition, according to Beth Allison Barr, "comprehensive pastoral care literature included the basic elements of past texts as well as providing clerics with practical knowledge about their craft—enumerating for priests exactly what they needed to teach their parishioners, how to administer the sacraments, and how to preach and perform the divine office," in *The Pastoral Care of Women in Late Medieval England* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2008), 28.

¹⁸ Sarah Salih, ed. *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 54.

¹⁹ Alan J. Fletcher, *Preaching, Politics, and Poetry in Late-Medieval England* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 13.

education. Hagiographers adjusted traditional saints' lives to accommodate growing local and disparate communities of pious lay and extra-clerical people. Indeed, evidence within the *South English Legendary* indicates that these characteristics, especially the popular tone and the creation of spectacle out of the torture of the virgin-martyr, rule out particular audiences and suggests how the legendary departs from other traditional representations of saints' lives. If clerical anxieties over the pollution of the body produced a focus on virginity in more orthodox representations of saints, by contrast, the *vita* of Katherine in the *South English Legendary* shifts the concentration to the saint's conversionary power and non-gender-specific phenomena.

The history of the composition of the *South English Legendary* reinforces the notion that the religious, institutional, and educational changes in Europe after 1215 shaped both the production of the legendary and the context in which it was received. Because the *South English Legendary* circulated so widely and manuscript evidence is uncertain, scholars face, according to Anne Thompson, "the impossibility of attributing [the manuscripts'] ownership to a particular group or class of readers."²⁰ What is known, however, is that the compilation, of approximately 100 saints' lives in its initial form, was revised continuously until at least 1330 and today survives in more than 50 manuscripts. Furthermore, the details of this extensive manuscript tradition suggest that the *South English Legendary* was composed in the Worcestershire and Gloucestershire regions and that audiences in these areas were reading and listening to this collection of saints' lives. According to Katherine J. Lewis, it was intended for the clerical instruction of lay parishioners.²¹ Indeed, in the manuscript British Library Stowe 949, from the late fourteenth century, the scribe clearly prioritized utility over display, using minimal decoration except for rubrics and finding aids, and leaving ample space on particular folio for initials. However, the audience of the *South English Legendary* ostensibly encompassed all institutions of clerics. Manfred Görlach proposes links between specific manuscripts of the *South English Legendary* and the Augustinians, the Cistercians, the Premonstratensians, the Benedictine monks and nuns, and the Friars. Furthermore, according to Görlach, the secular clergy likely used certain copies, substantiating the possibility that clerical figures relied on the *South English Legendary* to instruct the illiterate; other copies of

²⁰ Anne Thompson, *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the South English Legendary* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 46-7.

²¹ Katherine J. Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2000), 16.

the legendary, such as Lambeth Palace 223, were privately owned.²² In addition, the wills of laypeople dating from the mid-fourteenth century feature the *South English Legendary* among collections of saints' lives, demonstrating that hagiographies and legends appealed to audiences outside of clerical orders.²³

The provenance of the manuscripts of the legendary reinforces connections that can be drawn between the specific adaptations of *vitae* and the audiences that received it. Evidence suggests that Laud Misc. 108, along with the later manuscripts including Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 43, British Library, Egerton 1993, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Eng. Poet. A.1 were composed around the Worcester region, which is significant because, as R.M. Thomson's study of Worcester monks and education around the year 1300 shows, the regions of Worcestershire and Gloucestershire had a vibrant, working monastic population, but also its lay communities participated in the intellectual life at Worcester Cathedral.²⁴ According to Görlach, the activity of Worcester book culture does not imply that Worcester monks composed and compiled the *South English Legendary*; instead, he writes, "they might have rather frowned upon the vulgarizing of doctrine and the popular treatment of topics like university teaching at Oxford."²⁵ Dismissing the likelihood that monks produced this hagiographic collection, the non-clerical, extra-monastic, albeit educated inhabitants of Worcester more conceivably formed the communities interested in the production and circulation of the *South English Legendary*. This community would more reasonably form the primary audience of the *South English Legendary*, as well, given that the compilation condenses the long didactic doctrinal passages of earlier legends and emphasizes the miraculous deeds of saints, the sensational scenes of torture, dramatic plots, and vernacular, colorful dialogues within the narratives.

The saints' lives within the *South English Legendary* acquired the features of other popular genres, such as romance. As Paul Strohm explains, generic overlapping led to the use of the Middle English generic term "lyf" to describe not only saints' lives but also narratives that would otherwise be called "legends" or "stories."²⁶ The late thirteenth-century manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 108 assembles the *South English Legendary* together

²² Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary*, 45-50.

²³ Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 72-3.

²⁴ R.M. Thomson, "Worcester Monks and Education, c.1300," in *The Culture of Medieval English Monasticism*, ed. James G. Clark (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 104-110.

²⁵ Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary*, 37.

²⁶ Paul Strohm, "Passioun, Lyf, Miracle, Legende: Some Generic Terms in Middle English Hagiographical Narrative," *The Chaucer Review*, 10 (1975): 156-57.

with the Middle English popular romances *Havelok the Dane* and *King Horn*, among various religious and secular works, indicating that the owners were members of the country gentry, and that the manuscript appealed “as pious edification for readers and perhaps listeners who on other occasions might wish to divert themselves with romances.”²⁷ Moreover, this manuscript is among the earliest surviving copies of the *South English Legendary*, making it a resource for understanding how its original audiences, in the context of the changes caused by the rise in lay piety, received the text.

In the *South English Legendary*, the *vita* of Katherine, specifically, gives clues as to how romance audiences might have engaged with a saint’s life, and why audiences receptive to an emerging sense of independent spiritual authority might have taken an interest in Katherine’s persona. In the framework of romance, the *vita* focuses on the disruption of physical, bodily wholeness, bearing comparison to not only other Middle English lives within the hagiographic collection, notably the *vita* of St Margaret, but also to narratives of secular heroism, including *Havelok the Dane*, in which the protagonist’s knightly worth is measured by his ability to inflict suffering on enemy bodies.²⁸ In the *vita* of Katherine, the attention to corporeality shapes the discourse of sanctity, though without circumscribing her exclusively to the language of the body, and illuminates Katherine’s distinctive conversionary power, the result of which causes her sanctity to function contagiously within her community. Whereas the *vita* in Bodley 34, stressed introversive holiness and contained authority that would appeal particularly to solitary women, the *South English Legendary vita* dramatizes the visibility of Katherine’s teachings and torture, leading to an empowering display of faith that reverberates among her followers and converts. Furthermore, rather than appealing solely to female audiences through female-specific representations of devotional behavior, or the focus on paramystical phenomena and the “bride of Christ” topos, this *vita* gives prominence to male and female converts, showing that Katherine wielded influence on communities regardless of their gender and that her narrative may have been efficacious in ways that betrayed the scope of a more orthodox clerical intention. In particular, while “the female martyr has often been

²⁷ Julia Boffey, “Middle English Lives,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 620.

²⁸ Andrew Lynch, “Genre, Bodies, and Power in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 108: *King Horn*, *Havelok*, and *The South English Legendary*,” in *The Texts and Contexts of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 108: The Shaping of English Vernacular Narrative*, eds. Kimberly K. Bell and Julie Nelson Couch (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011), 187.

perceived as being more moving than the male martyr because of her greater weakness,”²⁹ the legendary’s addition of a sequence on a defiant male convert, named Porphyry, who asserts his authority under the guidance of Katherine and another female convert, suggests the strength of Katherine’s persuasion and the hagiographical account’s interest in the effect of her rhetoric on networks of Christian people.

The *vita* of the *South English Legendary* compresses the narrative found within the *Legenda aurea* by omitting the opening passages, which give an etymology of Katherine’s name that links her to the extraordinary faith, strength, and deeds that the narrative will recount, as well as a detailed account of Katherine’s origins as the learned daughter of a king who lives at home in a rich palace full of servants. The *South English Legendary vita* introduces Katherine as a noble princess, but also opens by characterizing her as a great cleric of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, which comprise the seven liberal arts of the medieval university curriculum; Katherine achieves her learned status by the age of eighteen, when she arrives at Alexandria (“gret clerk þis Mayde was; / þare nas non of þe seue .Ars”) (3-4).³⁰ Katherine’s association with the traditionally male clerical provinces of learning and scholarship anticipates a narrative that abandons a dichotomy between male logic and female emotion, and that instead frames male and female skills, particularly the skill by which uses language to construct arguments, in similar terms. Katherine enters the city courageously (“baldeliche”), instantly stricken with pain (“gret deol in hire heorte”) after witnessing pagan worship of “Anouri þe Maumates,” and discovering Christians in fear (“mani cristine Men for drede”) (13-14). Katherine remonstrates with Emperor Maxentius for his false religion and idolatry, and his persecution of the Christian people, but she simultaneously displays courtesy, praising him before making her complaint: “‘Sire,’ heo seide, ‘riche Aumperour þou art : swiþe noble and hende, / þov scholdest þi wisdom and þi wit” (“‘Sir,’ she said, ‘a good emperor you are, so noble and gracious; you should show wisdom and reason’”) (15-16). The emperor has adopted

²⁹ Maud Burnett McInerney, “Rhetoric, Power, and Integrity in the Passion of the Virgin Martyr,” in *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virgins in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 1999), 50.

³⁰ All subsequent in-text citations come from Carl Horstmann’s edition of the *Early South-English Legendary, or Lives of Saints* (London: EETS, 1887). This edition uses the version of the *South English Legendary* in Laud Misc 108. The content of the *vita* of Katherine in this manuscript is relatively similar to the *vitae* of the base manuscripts used by Charlotte D’Evelyn and Anna J. Mill in their edition (Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 145 and British Museum MS Harley 2277). It primarily differs in dialect. Textual variation is small, and MS Harley 2277 is nearly contemporary to Laud Misc 108. See Thomas R. Litzka, “MS Laud Misc. 108 and the Early History of the *South English Legendary*,” *Manuscripta* 33 (1989): 75-91. Recent studies of Laud Misc. 108 offer new understandings of the contexts of the manuscript, and reaffirm the importance of Worcester in the composition of the manuscript’s works. See Bell and Couch, eds., *The Texts and Contexts of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 108*.

the role of intercessor for the “kynerich under him” (“the community under his rule”), and it is precisely his intercession that Katherine comes to subvert through her faith-based reason and noble conduct (6).

Katherine reveals the emperor’s folly as a spiritual intermediary by teaching, by contrast, Christian wisdom, persuading him to turn his gaze toward the heavens. Her authoritative speech on the nature of the universe from the Christian perspective, using scholarly quotations, distinguishes her enlightened virtue from Maxentius’s corruption and error of faith. In these early scenes, Katherine’s rhetorical power and erudition demonstrate not her unique spiritual relationship with God, but rather the modes of learning that undermine conventional authority and her fearlessness before orthodox learning. The Emperor feels surprise (“gret wonder”) and becomes speechless before Katherine’s initial display of verbal competence; not only her beauty (“hire fair-hede”) but also her wisdom (“hire Quoyntise”) astonishes him (32). Diverging from the theological topics of Katherine’s speech, once more exposing his error in faith and knowledge, he inquires about her family connections, as her rhetoric suggests she is noble and free (“gent and freo”) (37). However, Katherine’s focus remains on religious wisdom. She emphasizes the value of humility, teaching Maxentius, “Man ne schal him-sulue preisi” (“man shall not praise himself”) (42). While she admits her status as a king’s daughter, she rebelliously deflects the preoccupation with her genealogy into an assertion reminding Maxentius that she has come to speak with him about his error of religion (“bi-leuez a-mis”), and, in conjunction, his inability to rule well over his people (46). Katherine lectures the emperor:

For, sire Aumperur, þou art : ase ech man is al-so
Pat hote mai and hys men moten : need hys hestes do,
Of bodi and of soule þou art y-maud : ase þi-sulf miȝt i-seo ;
Mid riȝte þi soule Maister is : and þi bodi is hyne schal beo.
ȝif þi bodi maister is : and þi soule is hyne,
Aȝen kuynde it is: and þou worst sikur : þare-fore of helle pine.
(55-60)

(“For, sir emperor, you are, as each man is, who commands men and women, and you must follow instructions that you are made of body and soul, as you might see yourself; with reason your soul is your master and your body shall be its servant. If your body is master and your soul is servant, this goes against nature, in which case you surely are the worse and therefore will face the torment of hell.”)

Katherine’s lecture on the superiority of the soul to the body reflects her clerical knowledge (“clergie”) and represents the kind of material an educated layperson in late-

thirteenth-century England might have used to authorize his or her own religious speech.³¹ Katherine here leaves Maxentius unable to answer her on any point (“ne coupe hire ansuerie in none pointe”), a silence that signifies Katherine’s verbal control (61-2).

Although dumbfounded and speechless, Maxentius continues to resist Katherine’s authority by convoking 50 wise men—“þe gretteste maistres of clergie” (“the greatest clerical masters”)—to challenge the virgin’s reasoning (66). When these men declare, “hire resones alle a-quenche !” (“her reason shall be subdued”), they reinforce the gendered dichotomy that Katherine repeatedly subverts, and claiming that Katherine will never encounter men wiser than them, they proceed to challenge her (76). One of the clerics questions Katherine’s confidence in her superior argumentation and undermines her theological message: “þenchestþou speke a-zein ore clergie? : turne þi þouzt, ich rede ! / þov seist þat god al-miȝti : dethz on eorþe þolede here : / I-chulle proui þat [god] ne miȝte a-liue beo : nouþe in none manere” (“Do you think you can speak against our clergy? Turn your thoughts, I counsel you! You say that the almighty God experienced death here on earth. I will prove that God did not exist, not in any way”) (96-8). While Katherine broaches her theological claims with courtesy, the oppressive nature of the cleric’s teaching, and his insistence on the fact that his formal learning exceeds Katherine’s own rather than on actual theological truths and rationale, exemplify the broader contrast the *vita* establishes between the brashness of those beneath a cloud of religious error and the calmness and gentility of the Christian people.

However, despite the rebuttals of Maxentius’s clerics, Katherine’s formal arguments, which are strengthened especially by her typological reasoning, tying classical authorities to Christian theology, subvert their claims. Through them, Katherine ultimately convinces and converts these grammarians and rhetoricians to Christianity, persuading them to recognize their inferior knowledge of God and Katherine’s superior perspective. Katherine addresses one cleric, “þou faillest of þin art...God hadde euere and euere he schal” (“You fail at your skill...God exists and always will”), which appears as an absolute statement. However, her claims are also bolstered by syllogisms, allegory, logic, mystical knowledge, and even the heroic imagery of Christ sometimes deployed by thirteenth-century scholastic thinkers: “he þolede deth wel stronge” (“he endured death bravely”) (103, 105, 108). Mentioning Plato, “þe grete philosophe” (115), Balaam, “ouwer prophete” (119), and the three kings, she substantiates her assertions to the wise men by referring them to the book, another suggestion of her use of

³¹ See Andrew Reeves, *Religious Education in Thirteenth-Century England: The Creed and Articles of Faith* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

scholastic method: “Lokiez In is boke, hov it miȝte beo soth” (“Look in this book, how it is the truth”) (117). The *vita* thus makes Katherine’s claims more credible by linking her knowledge to bookish *auctoritas*, inviting comparison to the medieval literary convention in which the author invokes an ancient or biblical book to assert his or her authority and acquire a respectable place within a learned lineage. Here, Katherine makes her rhetorical gesture of *auctoritas* in reference to the teachings of Balaam on the subject of heaven: “In is bok he seide-
-3e wuten wel ȝware : ȝif ȝe wollez loki þer-to” (“In his book he said, you will know well, if you will look therein”) (120).

Like Maxentius, these wise men convert when they cannot supply an answer following the end of Katherine’s speech, concluding, “for heo seith so i-wis, / We seggeth, þe holie gost is with hire” (“For she says it so certainly, we say, the Holy Ghost accompanies her”), and “we ne conne hire answerie nouȝt” (“we cannot supply her with any answer”), but their reaction compromises their revered place in the emperor’s court (132-33, 134). By this point, Maxentius has only grown angrier with his company of scholars, who fail to effectively undermine Katherine’s case for the Christian God: “nis non of eov þat can— / A-mong so manie grete Maistres—: answerie a fol woman?” (“Is there no one among you, among so many great masters, who can answer a foolish woman?”) (129-30). Unbeknownst to them, their conversion condemns them to death, but again Maxentius’s punishments and oppression directly correlate to Katherine’s demonstrations of religious authority; the wise men, declaring that they will become Christians (“cristine we wollez beon”), are martyred and comforted by Katherine at the moment they are executed (136). Emphasizing through repetition how the clerics act out of love for God (“godes loue”), the narrator suggests that they are glad to meet their deaths, which occur by burning alive in a fire (146). Their attitude toward martyrdom effectively subverts Maxentius’s punishment, showing that they appropriate his error and cruelty to Christian ends.

The scene of the wise men’s conversion and martyrdom re-issues the question of how male audiences in late-thirteenth-century England might have received Katherine’s *vita* in the *South English Legendary*. This narrative includes the detail of Katherine’s virgin purity, constructing her as a devotional figure accessible specifically to women in the scene in which Maxentius threatens to make Katherine his queen, to sit nobly in his palace to be honored by men, and Katherine, in response, declares her spousal commitment to Christ: “god almiȝties spouse ich am” (“I am the almighty God’s bride”) (165). However, the *vita* is concerned more broadly with Katherine’s accessibility to both male and female audiences, emphasizing more consistently the reason and divine intercession that empower her to convert those who hear her

speeches and witness her trials. As the scene of the wise men's conversion shows, Katherine's wisdom causes her audiences to practice silence in defiance of the emperor, and next, I will suggest that her bold speech also causes the people beneath Maxentius's authority to vocalize their rebellion. When Katherine refuses to occupy the role of Maxentius's objectified idol, to which the people under his rule would pray, and to conform to his expectations, she commits an act of self-sacrifice that is relatable to audiences regardless of their gender.

Indeed, in addition to converting the wise men in Maxentius's court, Katherine teaches and shapes both women and men throughout her *vita*, particularly after Maxentius begins to torment her. Maxentius deploys mechanisms of torture against her, stripping her of her clothing and binding her to a pillar, using "stronge scourges" ("strong scourges") against her, and then incarcerating her in a dark prison deep in the earth for twelve days and twelve nights without food or drink (168). However, with each of Maxentius's punishments Katherine demonstrates greater evangelizing influence, interceding in the education of Maxentius's court members, creating the impetus for conversion. This occurs in the case of both the Empress and Sir Porphyry, a knight of the Emperor's court, who watch as an angel of heaven descends into the prison where Katherine is held to treat her wounds. When these angels rise in the middle of the night to visit her, "i-seiȝen þare gret liȝt ; / gret wounder heom þouȝte ȝwar-of were: þe deorke stude so briȝt" ("They see there a great light; great wonder they thought there, the dark space so bright") (181-82). The Empress and Sir Porphyry's vision of Katherine in the cell elicit new manifestations of sanctity, as both figures develop a profound reverence for Katherine's miracle and her rational teaching. Conceding to the empress's plea to learn, Katherine tells her that her martyrdom will make her an immortal spouse, evoking the trope of the Bride of Christ that appealed to female audiences. The scene of exchange between Katherine and the Empress helps to develop broader female resistance to paternal authority, as the empress emerges from the prison cell upbraiding the emperor for his cruelty, after which he, enraged, tears his wife into pieces, literalizing the fragmentation of his own political body.

Sir Porphyry echoes the empress's cries for Katherine's instruction, even falling to her feet and crying mercy, reinforcing the idea that Katherine in this particular *vita* wields influence over male figures. Katherine teaches about God and Saint Mary "so þat Aumperesse and profirre: þoruȝ þis Maide þere, / And twei hondred of oþer folk: I-baptizede weren" ("So that the empress and Porphyry, because of this Maiden there, and two hundred others were baptized") (191-92). Her preaching—the text indeed stresses the word "prechede" through repetition—elicits mass conversion, which situates her as a spiritual adviser with the status of

priest to the newly reformed, and not only to the class of aristocrats and clerics but also to the laity beneath Maxentius's rule (190-92). For the audience of the *South English Legendary*, Katherine's debate lends her especially to pastoral use, and she comes to stand for Christian *communitas*. The *vita* parallels the audience imagined within the diegetic world of the text to the audience of the text in England by staging Katherine as an intercessor, an instructor, and a creator of community.

Katherine's conversionary influence produces a sense of collectivity that threatens the unity of the emperor's city. Furthermore, the passages in which Maxentius inflicts violent torture upon Katherine and the converts illuminate a dialectical relationship between wholeness and fragmentation, which corresponds to the construction and breakdown of different communities in the *vita*. Maxentius recognizes the collapse of his own community when he finds his former loyal subjects and wife persuaded by Katherine and sees the divine restoration of her body in the prison cell. Each time Maxentius attempts to tear Katherine to pieces, he finds her completely restored, which further separates him from his cohort of obedient followers. The scenes of persecution also evoke symbolic images of bodily fragmentation and repair. Katherine declares her resilience in the face of these tortures: "For al þi pouwer þou ne schalt: fram ihesu crist wende mi þouzt. / Al þat torment þat þou miȝt þenche . . . redi ich am to fonge" ("For all your power you will not have it over me. From Jesus Christ comes my mine, and all the torment that you might inflict...I am ready to accept") (216-18). After establishing Katherine's confidence in her sacrifice, the narrative describes the machinery of the wheels, studded with iron saws and sharp nails that cut Katherine into pieces, as well as the protection of her body by divine intercession:

Four ȝweles of Iren he let fullen: with rasores. kene I-nowe,
And with ginne heom makede tuye a-boute : þe tweien on þat on half opward,
þe oþur tweine euene heom aȝein : In þat oþur half a-done-ward,
þat, ho-so bi-tweine were: In none half ne miȝte him wende
þat þe rasores nolden al is flechs: to-drawen and to-rende.
(222-26)

("Four wheels of iron he used, with sharp enough razors, and with the device made her turn around, the two wheels were on one side upward, the other two against her side facing downward, so that on neither side he could not cut her in half, that the razors would not cut her flesh or tear her apart")

This passage reiterates the dialectic between wholeness and fragmentation, literalizing the Christian contest against paganism through Katherine's power to resist the effects of torture. Furthermore, in a *deus ex machina* moment, an angel breaks apart the wheel in yet another act

of fragmentation, and so violently that it kills thousands of pagans:

Sone so þis Maide was i-don þar-on: hire bodi fo-to schende,
Ore swete louerd fram heuene : an Aungel to hire gan sende :
Þis Aungel with a drawe swerd: þe ʒweoles al-to-hev,
Þat þe peces a-boute flowen: ase corn ʒwane man it sev,
And smot of þis lufere men: wel harde to þe grounde;
Four þousend þ[er]e weren a-slawe: In a lutel stounde.
(227-32)

(“Immediately this maiden was placed there, her body to be destroyed, when our sweet lord from heaven sent an angel to her, and this angel drew a sword at the heavy wheels, so that the pieces flew here and there, as when men divide crops, and they smote those evil men boldly to the ground; Four thousand men were slain, in a short span of time”)

The angels effectively counter Maxentius’s effort to murder the individual saint with the murder of countless of his obedient subjects.

The torture of Katherine does not successfully dismember her—it takes beheading her to do this—and the preservation of her body reinforces the ties between heroic bodies and divine protection more broadly in saints’ lives. The lurid treatment of the virgin body in her *vita* is not surprising in the context of female hagiography. The saintliness of Saint Margaret is measured by her ability to endure or resist corporeal punishment, which testifies to the triumphant, heroic parting of her body from the world. After death, virgins like Margaret and Katherine heal the sick and effect miracles. In Katherine’s *vita* in the *South English Legendary*, an angel takes her body to the hill of Sinai for proper burial, after which her tomb emits a holy oil that cures sick men, showing that the power of the relic is transferred to the reliquary.³² Indeed, the *vita* of Saint Katherine, in particular, emphasizes the links between Katherine’s corporeal wholeness, her discourse on the body, and her conversionary power. After her imprisonment, the Emperor is astonished to find Katherine “hol and sound” (“whole and sound”) in her cell, her body healed after terrible suffering, and again after her torture on the iron wheel (200). Similarly, when Katherine is beheaded, milk, rather than blood, pours out of her wounds, and angels accompany her body: “ʒwijt Milk heo i-seiʒen eorne out of þe wounde : and nouʒt o drope of blode. / Aungles comen and nomen þat bodi” (“They see white milk emerge out of her wounds, and not one drop of blood. Angels come and take her body”) (291-92). This bodily wholeness and purity, signified by the white milk, recalls Katherine’s earlier

³² Evidence suggests that many of the architects of the medieval chapels devoted to Saint Katherine wanted to evoke Mount Sinai, a popular destination for symbolic pilgrimages, as suggested by the buildings’ location on hilltops. See Katherine J. Lewis, “Pilgrimage and the Cult of St Katherine in Late Medieval England,” in *St Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe*, eds. Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine J. Lewis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 37-9.

preaching on the nature of the body and soul.

This scene might have been especially appealing to male audiences given the subversive activity of the male figure Porphyry; again, the victimization of Porphyry suggests that the Christian community Katherine engenders within the *vita* is not female-specific. The *Golden Legend* glosses over Porphyry's torture, but the *South English Legendary* reinvents his figure and gives him agency, abandoning the dynamics of gendered power by privileging men and women alike as religious radicals. The knight steals the queen's severed body, which is called holy and good ("holi...and guod"), to honor it with a Christian burial (249). Here, the *vita* sets up a tension between an obedient male figure and an authority figure, departing from a female-oriented narrative of rebellion and sanctity. When Maxentius has tormented many men, enraged that his wife has received this burial, Porphyry directly confronts Maxentius, admits that it was he who did the act, and declares his adamant loyalty to Christ in replacement of his submission to imperial authority: "Sire, lo me here, / Ich burede þat holie bodi: þat was cristus make; / And to Ihesu Crist ich hobbe al-so: al min heorte i-take; / For no pouwer þat þou miȝt don: I-nelle him for-sake" ("Sir, look at me here. I buried that holy body, that was made by Christ; and to Jesus Christ I have also sworn myself, all my heart I give. For no power that you might have will I forsake him") (252-55). Porphyry thus demonstrates his bold speech in defiance of the emperor, whose limbs shake with anger and who continues to pray to Mahun for guidance. In his speech, he links the holy body to God's creation. And while, as Sarah Salih writes, "a woman alone facing men representing institutionalised power, in the context of virgin hagiography, can only be the heroine,"³³ Porphyry's speech pivotally demonstrates how Katherine's dedication to the active pursuit of freedom and liberation of the emperor's subjects resonates broadly and among men within the fictional communities of the *vita*.

Feeling betrayed, the emperor uses the language of bodily fragmentation to articulate the loss of these companions, imagining Porphyry as his heart ("And porfirie al min heorte was") (259). The emperor's lament reiterates his recognition that he has lost his followers to Katherine's Christianity; in the scene of the conversion of the wise heathen clerics, Maxentius declares that they are traitors ("trichours," 137; "traitors," 201) who must be put to death. In these scenes of anger, the emperor more figuratively enacts a process of self-dismemberment, which manifests literally in his torture of others. Katherine, in fact, draws a link between his ability to rule and his actions, explicitly criticizing his use of torture by asking him, "is þis a

³³ Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, 198.

guod Ivuggement, / gulte-lese Men for mine gulte : to bringe in swuch torment?" ("Is this good judgment, to inflict torment upon guiltless men, in punishment for her guilt?") (205-6). Her speech illuminates the thoughtless fury that drives Maxentius's decision-making, which emphasizes, by contrast, her rationality. As Maxentius tears apart the body of his wife and, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, the body of Porphyry, he also martyrs the figures that were once loyal to him. He effectively breaks down his familial and local communities as he persecutes the Christian people. This fragmentation recalls Katherine's spiritual and bodily wholeness, which causes Maxentius to ask in astonishment, "ȝwat...hou geth þis ? : heo is hol and sound ?" ("what...how is this possible? She is whole and sound?") (200). The *South English Legendary* constructs a dialectic between corporeal unity and bodily fragmentation to articulate the difference between the oppressive emperor and an audience, bound by their faith to Katherine and Christianity.

The *vita* emphasizes the broad impact of both Katherine's body and her sagacity. Her postmortem body heals the hundreds of Christians who visit her, and uniquely, the mode of her torture is linked to her ability to convert through intellectual and rational conversation. The wheel, the identifying emblem of Katherine's torture, comparable to Agatha's breasts or Barbara's tower in their respective saints' lives, recalls the educational practice of learning "by rote"; while Katherine's *vita* here compares to other virgin-martyr lives in that it invites symbolic, as well as literal readings, her actual torture differs from other lives by thwarting the focus on female sexuality as the site of conflict. The *vita* in Bodley 34 privileges the devotional speeches of Katherine and the female saint's special relationship with Christ. However, the *South English Legendary* concentrates on Katherine's exploits, the dispersion of her faith-based actions, and her construction of Christian *communitas*.

Katherine's holy behavior becomes exemplary, but this occurs within the text itself before it occurs within the audience. Katherine's followers within the *vitae* initiate the trend of *imitatio Christi*, or here, *imitatio Sanctae*, thus modeling the process of imitation for the historical audiences of the *South English Legendary*. This version of her *vita* de-emphasizes the devotional aspect, even abandoning the focus on Christ as Katherine's bridegroom, which traditionally takes precedence in hagiographical accounts of Katherine. Instead, the *vita* allots narrative space in which new consequences of Katherine's sanctity can manifest. It is particularly interesting that Katherine's faith radiates out to influence a large group of people because, even as authors were not reluctant to make female figures into protagonists, they did

not necessarily stage heroines to be imitated by male audiences.

While the manuscript histories of the *vitae* of the *South English Legendary* and the version in Bodley 34 suggest overlapping contexts of reception in the West Midlands region, these versions represent Katherine's disputes with conventional authority differently, indicating that they were intended to be received by distinct audiences. That Katherine avoids the contemplative life must have made her accessible to non-monastic cultures in late medieval England, and much of the scholarship on the *vita* of Katherine in the *South English Legendary* argues for a specifically gendered subversion of authority. Karen Winstead's focus on unruly virgin martyrs in the *South English Legendary* reveals "examples of masculine wrath in the face of feminine mastery" and instances in which "the voices of authority against which the virgin struggles are male voice."³⁴ However, gendered power seems less at play in the *South English Legendary* hagiography, as newly converted male figures demonstrate equally extraordinary and radical displays of faith, embracing an active independence from institutions that attempt to intercede in the relationship with God. The *South English Legendary* dramatizes the consequences of Katherine's disobedience, emancipating her from roles expected of her in other versions. In addition, Katherine models this position for male characters that seek independence. In the context of thirteenth-century fraternalism, the polyvocality of the *vita* suggests a power dynamic not between men and women but between lay audiences and oppressive figures or institutions of authority. Katherine's confrontation with paternal authority might have appealed to the struggle for religious liberty, and her reason and intellect might have granted her *vita* a social, political, and religious utility, as a work that legitimized and mobilized resistance to orthodox authority.

In the fourteenth and especially fifteenth centuries, the account of Katherine expands into a full *vita*; new episodes give accounts of Katherine's genealogy, early life, conversion, and mystical marriage, before commencing the *passio*. However, the hagiographical period of 1400-1500 shows a greater conservatism in the representation of holy women, and of Katherine specifically. John Capgrave's *vita* (c. 1445), for instance, presents the story of Katherine's parentage and upbringing, as well as her conversion and mystical marriage, before episodes of Katherine's confrontation with Maxentius and subsequent martyrdom. The *vita* by Capgrave associates Katherine's learning with danger by including the detail that her father built a walled palace to contain the pleasure he took in his daughter's knowledge. To similar ends, Mirk's life,

³⁴ Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, 76.

concerned with establishing male clerical authority as the sole authority, never truly allows Katherine to disturb patriarchal law. These hagiographies represent a significant shift from the subversive *South English Legendary* version of Katherine's *vita*, containing Katherine where she was once a candid critic of secular power, and making her voiceless where she previously influenced the laity and where her education protected those who faced martyrdom. It is thus worth recognizing the uniqueness of the *South English Legendary* in the hagiographic tradition, as it implies audiences receptive to a quasi-sacerdotal female saint who could defy conventions and traditional relationships of power and subordination. Katherine's construction of Christian community inspires a consideration of how the *South English Legendary* as a whole collection helped to form communities of readers and listeners in a period of social and institutional transition. Particularly by imagining diverse audiences for Katherine's torture and rhetorical displays of feat within the narrative, the legendary inscribes its audiences in Katherine's world, as not only viewers but also active agents who defy Maxentius. As a result, the *vita* effectively connects imagined communities of Christians with the actual communities that engaged with the account of Katherine, and in ways that might have empowered audiences whose claims to authority lay in individual faith and collective lay pious practices, rather than the orthodox clergy.